

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO
LONDON

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TRAVELER

Best OF THE World

21 MUST-SEE PLACES FOR 2017

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Red Hot Seoul

MAGIC MALTA

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EDITOR'S NOTE BY GEORGE!



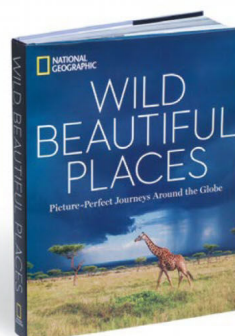
Room with a view in Monument Valley, Arizona (and no, those aren't George's legs).

Curiosity is the desire to inquire. It pushes us to new places and unlocks secrets about the world and ourselves. Curiosity impels us to ask not only where to go but also why to go. Our annual “Best of the World” issue dives into a new year and builds an itinerary full of the places we love and the experiences that matter now. We’ve picked 21 places to be in 2017—from Malta, for its mix of ancient and modern, to Seoul, for its kinetic glow, to Banff, for Canada’s sesquicentennial celebration of cool. We believe that every traveler is an explorer and every journey is an opportunity to discover. We’re kick-starting that journey with a fresh look. “Further,” our brand-new, front-of-the-book global guide to inspired adventures, brings energetic design to our pages and invigorated momentum to our coverage. I’d like to thank the *Traveler* team for the expertise and imagination that fuels our work each day. On every page we help travelers dream, plan, go, and share their journeys. Including this page, which features a photograph taken in Monument Valley in Arizona, by Suvi Höyden, a member of the National Geographic Your Shot photo community. Thanks to our readers, we are able to dedicate 27 percent of our annual profits toward supporting the exploration and conservation mission of the National Geographic Society. Talk about meaningful journeys! We hope your own boundless curiosity leads you to the best the world has to offer in 2017. —George W. Stone, Editor in Chief

Nat Geo Highlights

PHOTO BOOK

Embark on an extraordinary adventure with *Wild Beautiful Places*, a collection of 50 far-flung and picture-perfect travel destinations. Get it at shop.nationalgeographic.com.



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Our goal is to inspire our readers to explore the world. For ideas about where to go next, subscribe to *National Geographic Traveler* at natgeotravel.com.

CAPTURE DIFFERENT



FIVE WAYS TO GET WILD IN THE DESERT

Number One

SEE AND BE SEEN DOWNTOWN

Whether you're in the mood for dining, dancing, cocktail-ing or people-watching – or some of each – downtown Scottsdale's Entertainment District is the place to see and be seen any night of the week.



Number Two

DISCOVER COUNTER INTUITIVE

This tiny downtown bar is known for its rotating themes, award-winning cocktails and exclusive hours. Check them out Fridays and Saturdays from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Number Three

TRY IMPROVISATIONAL CUISINE

A restaurant with no menu? Welcome to POSH, where every multi-course meal is customized by Chef Joshua Hebert based on your preferences among the ingredients they have on hand. It's culinary adventure at its finest!

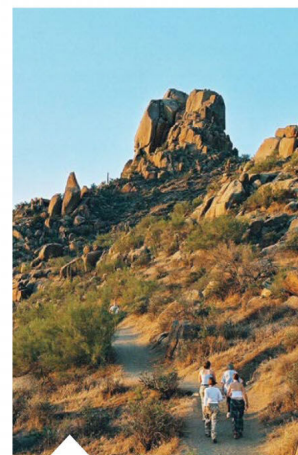


MARK HARTMAN

Number Four

PLAY A DOUBLEHEADER

Double your fun (and save a few bucks in the process) with a 36-hole day at one of Scottsdale's renowned golf courses like TPC Scottsdale, Grayhawk and We-Ko-Pa.



Number Five

CONQUER PINNACLE PEAK

For a little DIY exploration, hike to the top of this north Scottsdale landmark. The Pinnacle Peak summit trail is wide and smooth, and the views from the top are worth the uphill trek.



For information, call 800.309.1428 or visit AbsolutelyScottsdale.com where you can also request your free Experience Scottsdale guide.

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DECEMBER/JANUARY

VOLUME 33, NUMBER 6

In This Issue

BEST OF THE WORLD

From South Korea to Switzerland, Canada to Colombia, we celebrate 2017's must-see destinations around the world. Book your ticket now!

MINI GUIDE: LONDON

Keep calm and carry on with our brilliant British itinerary, including scone crawls, tailor tours, and surprising local sites.

OBSESSIONS: BREAKFAST

Wake up and smell the *kaya* toast in Singapore. This supersweet specialty takes some getting used to.

Follow & Share

SNAPCHAT

We've taken you to Bolivia, Kyrgyzstan, Iceland, and other amazing places—follow us on Snapchat at NatGeoTravel to see where we go next.

FACEBOOK LIVE

#NatGeoTravel is coming to you live! Watch our around-the-world adventures and interviews with explorers and photographers on our Facebook page.



A winter wonderland in Ylläsjärvi, Finnish Lapland, one of our Best of the World picks.

COVER: MORNING AT BANFF NATIONAL PARK'S MORaine LAKE, BY PAUL ZIZKA

I FEEL
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FALL IN LOVE WITH SLOVENIA

Alpine Paradise

For centuries, travelers from around the world, looking for splendor and something different, have been drawn to Lake Bled and its legendary island. Take a ride in a traditional wooden rowing boat – the pletna – and visit the island in the middle of the lake. Once there, ring the wishing bell in the little church and who knows, your wish might just come true.

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FURTHER

FLORIDA KEYS ● CALIFORNIA ROAD TRIP ● LONDON ● U.S. NATIONAL PARKS ● PERU ● AUSTRALIA ● CAPE TOWN

Iceland's Wilder Side

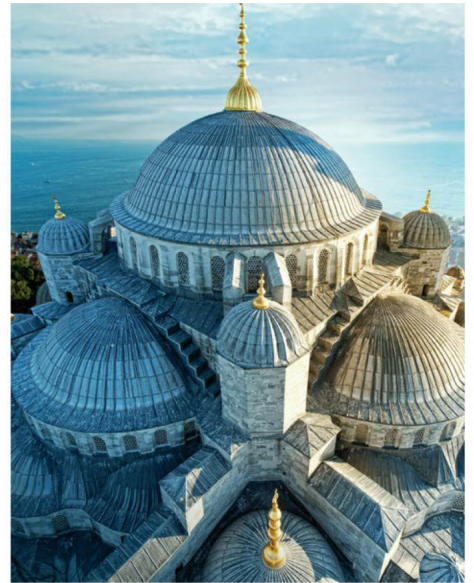
PHOTOGRAPH BY
DIANE COOK AND
LEN JENSHEL

Always take the road less traveled, especially when it's tucked into a blanket of soft moss in southern Iceland. Tranquil trails now flow through Katla Geopark's Eldhraun lava field, where one of Earth's largest volcanic eruptions occurred. See the otherworldly site on National Geographic Expeditions' "Iceland Adventure." natgeoexpeditions.com/explore.



ADVERTISEMENT

DISCOVER ISTANBUL



DISCOVER the Cuisine

The flavors of one of the world's greatest cuisines will remain on the tip of your tongue long after you've left Istanbul. The memory of the meats, the vegetables, and the sheer freshness of everything you taste will make you crave a repeat visit. And did we mention the variety of Turkish desserts? However long you spend in Turkey, you'll never have time to try it all, but you will certainly enjoy yourself while discovering as much as you can.

DISCOVER the Natural Beauty

East meets West in Istanbul, where the Bosphorus connects two seas. The area's greenery and deep turquoise hues enchant all who visit — and no wonder as it's remarkable to have such natural beauty and two seas right in a city center.

DISCOVER the History

Istanbul has been the capital of multiple empires, and you'll piece its history together as you wander the atmospheric city. Explore the wondrous Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia, the Basilica Cistern—and keep an eye out for Roman columns across some of Istanbul's thoroughfares. After all, this Turkish city is so rich in historic ruins that there's nowhere else to put them.



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Turkey
HOME



Turkey

HOME OF THE MAIDEN'S TOWER

THE MAIDEN'S TOWER

At sunset, experience a romantic candlelight dinner at the Maiden's Tower perched on a small islet at the entrance of the Bosphorus. You will marvel at the 360-degree view as Istanbul's skyline lights up and the sun disappears. Discover Turkey, home of The Maiden's Tower. Be our guest!

 Istanbul, Turkey

#HomeOf



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**TURKISH
AIRLINES** 

Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism

EXPLORER ON DUTY

1

Spear

"This fiberglass pole spear with a three-pronged steel tip uses rubber band tension to propel forward. I can typically get a lionfish in one or two tries, but I still have a long way to go compared to folks who are out on the water all the time. I always have to check the spear on planes. That thing is sharp!"

2

Regulator

"My dives typically last anywhere from 35 minutes to an hour, depending on how deep I'm going and how much energy I exert. When I hunt lionfish, I exert more energy. The most difficult part is learning to not breathe through your nose. You have to stick with slow, steady breaths through your regulator."

Erin Spencer

is a National Geographic young explorer on a mission to go fishin' for invasive lionfish threatening reef habitats in Florida. Read on for her local guide to the Keys.

By Alexandra E. Petri

NATGEOTRAVEL.COM

3

GoPro

"The GoPro is discreet and much cheaper than underwater equipment for DSLR cameras. When I was working in Fiji, I encountered a huge group of bull sharks on a dive and got some incredible footage (while keeping a safe distance, of course)." To watch some of Erin's GoPro videos, visit natgeotravel.com.

4

Dive Computer

"A dive computer should be compact and easy to use underwater. Also, always remember to check the battery! I've had my computer fail halfway through a dive when my battery died. When that happens, the best option is to end the dive, or you risk going too deep or ascending too quickly."

5

Dive Knife

"I use my knife to cut tangled fishing line or debris that threatens marine life or other divers. It has other purposes, too. When I was Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* for Halloween, I strapped the dive knife on as a finishing touch!"

6

Wet Suit

"Some divers are comfortable in just a light skin suit, which helps protect your actual skin from stinging creatures or cuts without overheating you. I'm not ashamed to admit I'm a ninny about being cold. I layer up with a three-millimeter wet suit over the skin suit, no matter how balmy the water is."





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Amsterdam



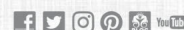
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EXPLORER OFF DUTY

Erin's Guide to the Florida Keys

WHERE TO STAY

Rent a cottage at the Island Bay Resort, an intimate waterfront property in Key Largo. Or for longer stays, consider Dove Creek Lodge, also located in Key Largo.

WHERE TO SNORKEL

You don't need scuba certification to discover Florida's marine life, Erin says. "Molasses Reef off Key Largo and Alligator Reef off Islamorada are great for snorkeling. Bahia Honda State Park also has a beautiful beach and offers snorkeling trips out to Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary, one of my all-time favorite spots."

WHERE TO SAMPLE KEY LIME PIE

Her dedicated quest for the best key lime pie has led to some fantastic finds. "My favorite is the classic key lime pie at the Fish House Encore in Key Largo. For a twist, try the key lime freeze at Key Largo's Mrs. Mac's Kitchen—it's like a smoothie, milk shake, and slice of pie all in one."



A shady sanctuary at
Mooring's Village resort
in Islamorada, Florida



Celebrating pie day at
Mrs. Mac's Kitchen in
Key Largo, Florida

Native to the Indo-Pacific, the lionfish is a carnivorous, venomous fish that threatens marine habitats in the western Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico. Ocean lover, travel addict, and explorer Erin Spencer has been helping to remove these maroon-and-white-striped fish from ecosystems throughout the Florida Keys since 2013. She also documents the innovative practices local communities use to address the problem of conserving their reefs, from hunting lionfish to serving them at restaurants. For divers wishing to join the fight against this invasive species, Islamorada Dive Center offers the Lionfish Eradication Course, a half-day program that includes two dives and discussions on how the species has affected marine habitats. The Reef Environmental Education Foundation in Key Largo also offers courses on the history of the lionfish invasion and how to handle these fish safely. When she's not chasing after lionfish, Erin is following her sense of adventure and appetite around the Keys, one slice of key lime pie at a time.

How to Dive for Lionfish

And learn to help save
the ecosystems of
Florida's waters



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ROAD TRIP

SAN DIEGO TO SANTA BARBARA



► **Miles:** 250 • **Days on the Road:** 2 • **Best Selfie Spot:** Point Mugu State Park • **Best Roadside Snack Stop:** Padaro Beach Grill, Carpinteria



A new year deserves a new road map. As one year closes and another queues up, change sits patiently on the horizon, waiting for you to take action.

Start off in California's southern city of San Diego, the land of year-round

sun and easy living, where creature comforts tempt passersby into extended stays. Continue north along Interstate 5, navigating through frenzied Los Angeles, finally finding balance among the hills of Santa Barbara in a safari tent.

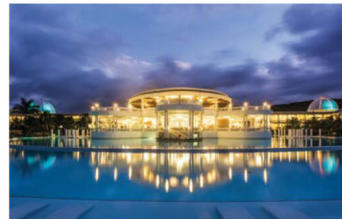
In 2017, bypass resolutions altogether and instead try a different approach to welcoming the New Year: Drive toward it without any hesitation, embrace its challenges, and let this road trip be your guide. Between San

Diego and Santa Barbara, you'll have a meet and greet with fear, reorient your view, and binge on donuts—all necessary stops when the new you is revved for adventure.

—Hannah Lott-Schwartz



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along the way in
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State Beach.



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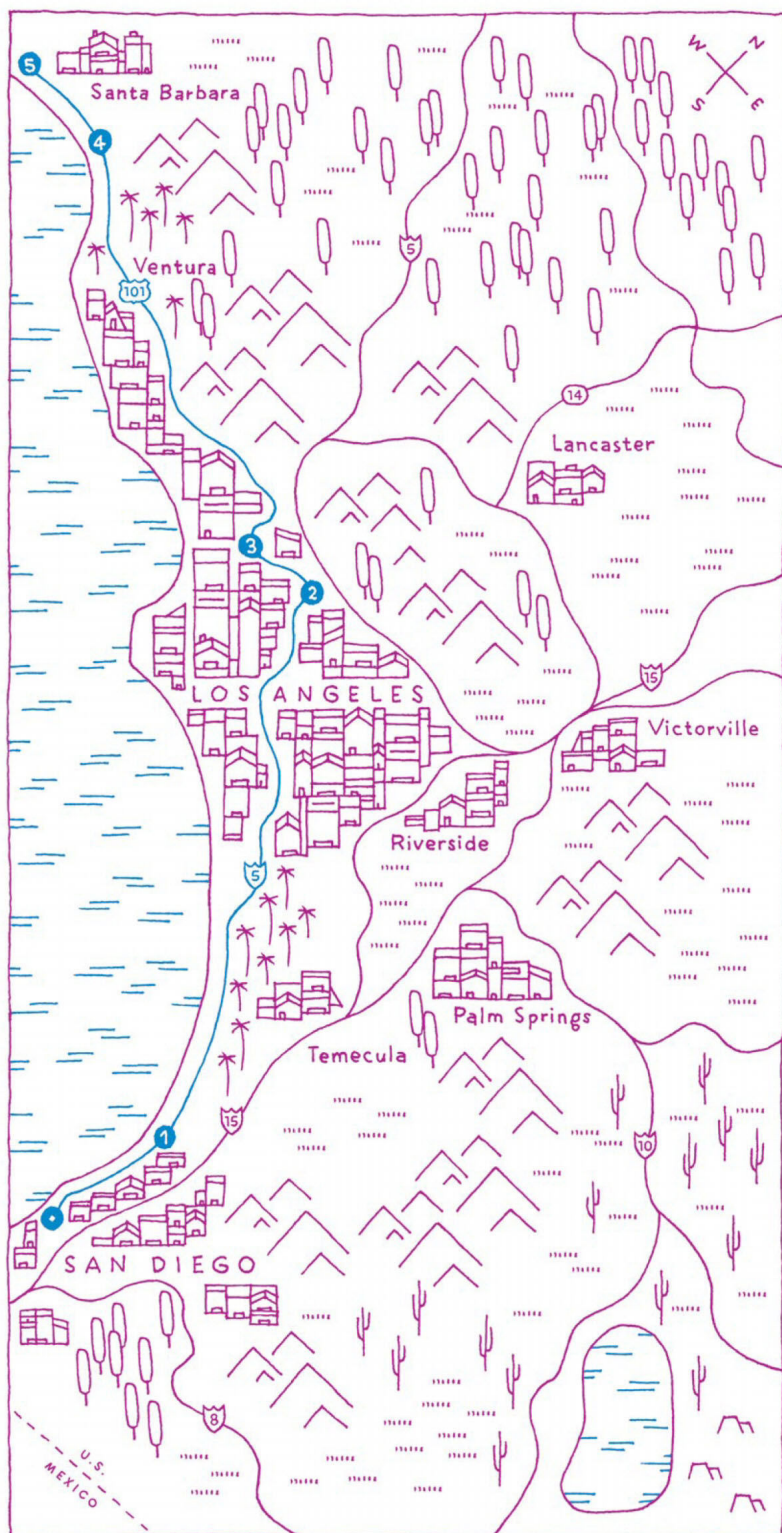
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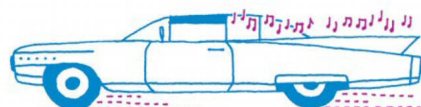
ROAD TRIP SAN DIEGO TO SANTA BARBARA



STOP 1

Adventure on the Fly

Standing at the edge of a cliff above Black's Beach in San Diego, you have just one choice: to jump. At **Torrey Pines Gliderport**, the wind's got your back—as does the paragliding pro you're strapped to. So say sayonara to fear as you leap directly into it, then ride the resulting adrenaline rush high above barreling waves below. flytorrey.com



PLAYLIST:

Need a soundtrack for your next drive? Stream our Southern California playlist on natgeotravel.com.

STOP 2

Feast Your Eyes

One good high deserves another: Enter **Donut Friend**, the sugar-spun shop with donuts that rock punny punk band names such as S'Morrissey and Drive Like Jelly. They'll fuel your hike to the **Griffith Observatory**, a domed marvel that overlooks Los Angeles. Peep into the telescope to put everything in perspective. donutfriend.com, griffithobservatory.org

STOP 3

Lonely Hearts Club

A wedding dress, cassette collection, even a thousand origami cranes—these are among the emotion-filled relics at the **Museum of Broken Relationships**. Notes written by anonymous donors give context to the crowd-sourced artifacts on display, framing a legacy of human experience that makes a compelling argument for shared catharsis. Join in. brokenships.la

STOP 4

Detox (then Retox)

Hidden below State Street in Santa Barbara lies **Salt**, North America's largest Himalayan salt therapy cave. Let 45 tons of minerals work its detox magic, then head to the Funk Zone, an arts district overflowing with viniculturalists who pour at outposts like **Municipal Winemakers**, a diving center turned tasting room. saltcavesb.com, municipalwinemakers.com

STOP 5

Stay the Night

At **El Capitan Canyon**, camp out in a luxury safari tent (made cushy with custom woodworking and Turkish textiles) that's surrounded by 350 acres of protected land. When the beach, heated pool, and endless trails leave you peckish, order the hotel's BBQ and s'mores kits and prepare the feast on your tent-side grill. elcapitan-canyon.com



Today's transport

Tomorrow's



Every time I take a flight, I am always mindful of
the many people who make a
successful journey possible.

Chief Albert Luthuli, Zulu Tribal Chief 1936-1967 (Durban)

LIKE THIS VEST?
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Pin points

Photographer Jonathan Irish has spent the past year in an Airstream. The views from his trailer window? Vistas of the Grand Canyon, Shenandoah mountains, Big Bend, and 56 other national parks from the United States' impressive collection, which celebrated its 100th birthday in 2016. Starting in the south, Irish and his wife, photographer Stefanie Payne, visited all 59 parks in 52 weeks, which they called the Greatest American Road Trip. Along the way, they dropped a camera in the water in Michigan, got a flat tire in Texas, and cracked a windshield in Alaska. Here, Irish shares some cross-country memories from his yearlong national park birthday party. —Hannah Sheinberg

REBECCA HALE/NGP STAFF

BIG BEND.

in Texas, is an underrated park in the system. The Southwest scenery, mountains, and sunsets blew our minds.

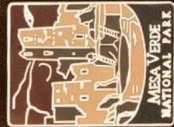
CONGAREE.

In South Carolina's we stumbled on an amazing old-growth forest that we had almost entirely to ourselves.





The salmon-fishing grizzlies in **LAKE CLARK** aren't very interested in people, so you can easily photograph them.



I have a list of hikes I want to do that I didn't have the time for while on this road trip, including the Rae Lakes Loop in **SEQUOIA**.



Two of the more memorable hikes we did were the Four Mile Trail and the Panorama Trail in **YOSEMITE**. The views at every turn were just breathtaking.



I think **DEATH VALLEY** is one of the most photogenic places that I've ever been.



KOBUK VALLEY, in northwest Alaska was the most remote and the hardest park to get to—it involved four bush flights.



CANADA EXPERIENCES.

FIND YOURS.



Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario

National Geographic's love affair with Canada has filled our magazines, books, website, and television channel for years. Now, five of our writers, photographers, and adventurers—just back from assignments in Canada—share the wild wonders, cities, culture, and cuisine that most inspired them. From urban streets to forest paths, there's a Canada experience waiting for you.

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Alastair Humphreys
 National Geographic
 Adventurer

DOWNTOWN TO LAKESHORE

ONTARIO

"This was a journey of remarkable contrasts. Trendy, exciting, incredibly international Toronto and then an easy two hours away, the Muskoka Lakes wilderness with beautiful cottages perfect for big family gatherings with plenty of activities. Then just another hour to tranquil Algonquin Provincial Park."

FAVORITE EXPERIENCES:

"Coming from the U.K., I'm awestruck by the extraordinary scale of Canada's wilderness. Algonquin Park has 2,000 lakes and the autumn colors were spectacular. Swimming, fishing, and stand-up paddleboarding at sunrise were special moments. Also loved biking through Toronto, especially the Kensington area, and sampling ethnic restaurants—even more multicultural than London!"

DON'T MISS:

"Canoeing the lakes and rivers of Algonquin Park is a must. My guide was so knowledgeable about the wildlife and wild landscape we paddled through."



Robert Reid
National Geographic
Digital Nomad and
Travel Writer

NORTHERN WILDERNESS

YUKON

“The vast Yukon Territory is still an undiscovered secret, filled with stunning far north wilderness. I zeroed in on the area around the capital town of Whitehorse and found very different experiences without covering lots of distance.”



Yukon River

FAVORITE EXPERIENCES:

“A thrilling canoe trip down the legendary, fast-moving Yukon River. Hiked to huge Kluane Lake. Biked up Grey Mountain. And explored the town of Whitehorse where Northern Lights paint the sky and murals paint the buildings—filled with dozens of art galleries and the Yukon River right downtown.”

DON'T MISS:

“The aerial tour over Kluane National Park’s 2,000 glaciers was amazing. Flying is the only way to truly appreciate the massive scale of raw rugged ice, mountain valleys, bright blue lakes, and floating icebergs.”



Montréal, Quebec



Eric Rosen
National Geographic
Travel Writer

CITY LIGHTS TO HIKES

QUEBEC

“Exploring Montréal’s vibrant food scene, biking through historic neighborhoods and along the Saint Lawrence River, and then having great wilderness adventures just outside the city really let me take the pulse of this extraordinary, invigorating area.”

FAVORITE EXPERIENCES:

“Phenomenal food halls and public markets reflect a robust restaurant culture fed by the renaissance of small local farms. Such a wealth of ethnic restaurants all across the city! A short day trip brought me to the Laurentians and beautiful hiking at Mont-Tremblant with forest paths, waterfalls, and spectacular panoramic views of the valley.”

DON'T MISS:

“Kayaking along the Lachine Canal will give you a fascinating eye-level look at the city’s 19th-century industrial past and imposing architecture.”



Nancy Gupton
National Geographic
Travel Writer

CROSS-COUNTRY BY RAIL

TORONTO to VANCOUVER

“I’m a train buff and this cross-country trip had been on my bucket list for years. It’s one of the world’s greatest rail journeys—2,775 miles across a huge country with ever-changing landscapes. The Old World feel really captures the romance of rail travel.”

FAVORITE EXPERIENCES:

“Incredible scenery start to finish—vast prairies, lakes, snow-capped mountains, picturesque towns. I loved trying regional specialties and hearing local musicians and experts who joined different legs of the trip. All these experiences build a real community between passengers.”

DON'T MISS:

“Be sure to spend time in the glass-ceiling Panorama Car. Fantastic views of the Rockies, especially beautiful Yellowhead Pass across the Continental Divide between Alberta and British Columbia.”



Cross-country VIA Rail



Ronan Donovan
National Geographic
Photographer

WONDERS ON THE WATER**THE MARITIMES**

“My 1,500-mile visual journey through Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island is a story of water—inland lakes, vibrant harbors, scenic coastal drives, bluffs battered by huge ocean swells, sustainable fishing villages, and unique culture shaped by the sea.”

FAVORITE EXPERIENCES:

“In Nova Scotia, I loved kayaking by seals, sea birds, and sailboats to camp on Moshers Island, accessible only by boat. Forest trails took me to

coves, bays, and a lighthouse. That evening a giant full moon rose up from the ocean—spectacular. Also toured a sustainable oyster farm on Big Island, Nova Scotia. And saw the world’s highest tidal swings at the Bay of Fundy.”

DON'T MISS:

“On Cape Breton Island, hike Highland National Park’s Skyline Trail and drive the Cabot Trail for breathtaking ocean views. Have your camera ready!”



Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

From vibrant cities to outdoor adventures, see where to go and what to do all across Canada, complete with information on attractions, entertainment, dining, weather, and more: keepexploring.ca

1 YUKON

Yukon: travelyukon.com

Aerial flight: kluaneglacierairtours.com

2 THE MARITIMES

Nova Scotia: novascotia.com

New Brunswick: tourismnewbrunswick.ca

Prince Edward Island: tourismpei.com

Moshers Islands: moshersislands.ca

Bay of Fundy: bayoffundytourism.com

Canada National Parks: pc.gc.ca

3 QUEBEC

Montréal: tourisme-montreal.org

Mont Tremblant: mont-tremblant.ca

Laurentides: laurentides.com

4 CROSS-COUNTRY BY TRAIN

Toronto to Vancouver: viarail.ca

5 ONTARIO

Ontario: ontariotravel.net

Toronto: seetorontonow.com

Voyageur Quest Outfitter:

voyageurquest.com

Algonquin Provincial Park:

algonquinpark.on.ca



Mini GUIDE

LONDON



“When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.” —Samuel Johnson



Brexit may have been controversial for the Brits, but travelers eager to visit London have reason to celebrate. Politics aside, the aftermath of Brexit brings tourism benefits to Americans because of a favorable exchange rate and more affordable transatlantic airfares.

Anglophiles drawn to the English capital will find that the city is still an eclectic mix of royal, modern, and

indie. Even native Londoners would need more than a lifetime to uncover everything that their city offers. Venturing beyond the historic center and popular must-see spots can feel as though you’ve wandered past a series of connected villages that sport football scarves as flags. Sometimes, it can seem like you’ve even, in the tradition of British television treasure Doctor Who, traversed through time and space itself.

In spite of the current

legislative upheaval, visitors will discover a welcoming city. Diversity is diffused throughout London’s 60,000 winding streets, from the experimental artist spaces to neighborhood ethnic eateries to the stocked stalls that line Saturday markets. In London, hipsters, global finance leaders, and expats convene as equals with a pint in hand at the local pub.

And that, Brexit or not, is a pretty great deal.

—Kaley Sweeney

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red telephone box.**



CitizenM Hotel's Tower of London location is both proper and plush.

Situate your stay along the Thames, the aquatic artery that threads through the heart of London. Just steps from both the river and Trafalgar Square, the **CORINTHIA** (●) boasts Victorian architecture, a planet-size crystal chandelier, a florist, and a swanky spa featuring an ice fountain and sleeping pods. Across the street from the Tower of London and a few minutes' stroll from the river is **CITIZENM**. (●) The 370-room hotel includes a lobby made to feel like your living room, if your living room were outfitted with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and Union

Jack accent pieces. Plus, there are Instagram-ready workspaces with complimentary espresso, a library saturated with style books, and a selection of iMacs in case you left your laptop at home. For an alternative stay, try the **GOOD HOTEL** (●), a floating former detention center for illegal immigrants. This new not-for-profit hotel will spend five years in the Royal Victoria Docks, serving up local craft beers in what was once the mess hall and waterfront views on its rooftop garden. Better yet: All the Good Hotel's profits go into an education and entrepreneurship program for its staff.

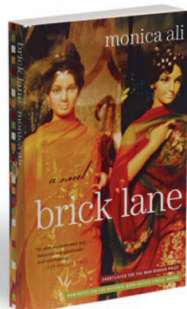
Rest Stops on the River Thames

By Kaley Sweeney

- CLASSIC
- TRENDY
- NEW

Literary Travels: London in Three Novels

By Nancy Pearl



Brick Lane MONICA ALI

In 1980s London an arranged marriage brings a young Bangladeshi woman to the immigrant enclave of Brick Lane, now known for its curry houses, vintage shops, and street art.

London EDWARD RUTHERFURD

An epic cast of fictional characters interacts with historical figures such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens in this compelling read spanning some two millennia of history.

Midnight Riot BEN AARONOVITCH

This twist on the typical police procedural is set in contemporary, albeit magical, London, where a constable gets help from a Victorian ghost in solving a Covent Garden murder.



DISCOVER

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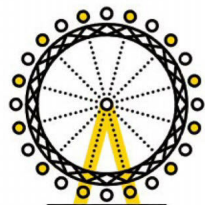
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SEE IT LONDON



If you liked:



London Eye



Buckingham Palace



Natural History
Museum



Westminster Abbey

Then try:

By Kaley Sweeney

Sky Garden

The recently opened, and free, Sky Garden in the 20 Fenchurch Street tower hosts evening live jazz amid a garden of palm trees, lavender, and rosemary. Early birds can test their balance during the garden's morning yoga.

Eltham Palace

The childhood home of Henry VIII, Eltham Palace served as one of England's largest and most frequented residences for royals from the 14th to 16th centuries. Today, walk over its moat on London's oldest working drawbridge.

Museum of Zoology

Tucked away in University College London, the Grant Museum of Zoology specializes in natural history and animal anatomy. The site provides a home to about 67,000 preserved specimens, many of which are extremely rare.

Neasden Temple

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir London, or Neasden Temple, is a Hindu temple in North London where the Indian-style marble meditation room may make you believe you've gotten off the Tube on a different continent.



The Grant Museum of Zoology displays an array of animal skeletons.

A Very Crumbly Scone Crawl

Famished from a day of trying to spot Will and Kate? Take a break for clotted cream and jam

By Hannah Sheinberg

For cuppa conservatives, Candella, off Kensington High Street, is everything you could ask for in a traditional tea shop. Order the cream tea, which features two warm, fluffy scones filled with raisins (1) and dusted with powdered sugar. At the Milestone Hotel, settle into one of the leather armchairs



in the Conservatory, a black-and-white lounge with windows for walls, and savor a maple-cured-bacon (2) scone paired with a pint. Finally, follow the fanfare to the Kensington Palace's Orangery for an orange-and-currant (3) scone and sips of the aptly named Afternoon at the Palace tea blend.



Scotland's Islay Woollen Mill; bottom: a few of the mill's famous fabrics.

Button Up for a British Tailor Tour

Mill about the United Kingdom countryside, weaving through the tweed trailblazers and bespoke benchmarks

By Christopher Hall



Tweeds or worsteds, flannels or mohairs, prized wool cloth still is woven in Britain's historic mills. In Scotland and Yorkshire, wool-weaving's historic heartland, a number of these factories receive visitors, allowing a fascinating glimpse at an honored custom—and maybe even a spot of shopping.

Rare looms from the early 20th century—the peak era for British production—still create tweeds and tartans at the Islay Woollen Mill, a small Scottish factory founded in 1883 on a streamside site where cloth has been made since the 1500s. Word of the mill's expertise with mainly British raw wool has spread as far as Hollywood, where costumers used the fabrics in films like *Braveheart* and *Forrest Gump*.

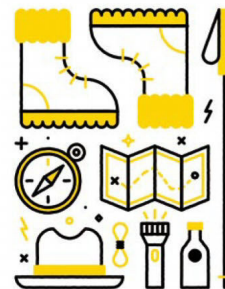
On the edge of England's Yorkshire moors, Taylor & Lodge has woven worsteds at the same factory since 1883. You'll need to make an appointment to visit, but it's worth it to watch skilled workers run the state-of-the-art machines that have fabricated cloth for top garmentmakers like couturier Tom Ford.

Established in 1947, Lochcarron of Scotland is the world's largest producer of tartan. During tours of its Selkirk mill, visitors clamp on headphones against the metallic roar of machinery as a guide explains the complex process of dyeing, winding, warping, and weaving scarves, stoles, and throws. Some of its 700-plus tartan patterns show up in the shop's jackets, ties, and traditional eight-yard kilts, so named for the amount of fabric required to make one.

GO WITH NAT GEO

BY LAND

When it's time to burn off those scones, lace up your hiking boots and head for the moors on National Geographic Expeditions' "Hiking England Coast to Coast," a 13-day adventure trip. You'll trek through the mountainous Lake District, into villages dotted along the Yorkshire Dales, and past prehistoric ruins.



BY SEA

View the United Kingdom from a new perspective, aboard the *National Geographic Orion* on the English Channel and Celtic Sea. National Geographic's "Exploring the Coasts of England and Wales" eight-day trip visits limestone cliffs, islands populated by puffins, and charming port towns.



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OBSESSIONS BREAKFAST

A Toast to Singapore

My quest for the city's sweetest start began with a bolt of *kopi* and a spread of *kaya* jam

By George W. Stone

Here's what my first breakfast in my new home of Singapore looked like: sticky, slime-colored coconut custard jam slathered over a thin crisp of toasted brown bread, served with a side of two eggs so undercooked that their whites retained the clarity of newly dead fish eyes. Alongside, a small cup of coffee with an oleaginous blackness that rejected the advances of condensed milk. It was not love at first sight.

And yet, in a way that only travelers can appreciate, a passion was born. The basis of a classic Singaporean breakfast, *kaya* is a custard of coconut milk, eggs, and sugar, flavored with pandan leaf, which gives the jam the perfume of freshly cut grass and the flavor of the underside of a lawn mower. In the Malay language, *kaya* means "rich." But the richness doesn't end with the jam. It's served with barely boiled eggs, cracked into



Fragrant, earthy, and sugary, *kaya* jam is the star of a stack of toast.

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NATURAL DRINK RECIPES

Honey Ginger Tea

Ingredients

3-4 sliced fresh ginger
1 cup water
2 tablespoons honey
1 stick cinnamon

Preparation

Boil the ginger and the cinnamon with the water for 10 minutes. Strain and mix your tea with the honey. Drink hot.



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OBSESSIONS BREAKFAST

a shallow dish and seasoned with soy sauce and white pepper. Hypercaffeinated coffee, made from beans sautéed in margarine and sugar, is sweetened to an unseemly viscosity. You can add iced Milo, a chocolate malt drink, for extra sugar. The whole meal—order it as “kaya toast”—is a staple in *kopitiams* (*kopi* is Malay for “coffee”; *tiam* means “shop” in Hokkien) and will set you back about \$2.50.

I came to see that kaya toast was the perfect vehicle for exploring my unfamiliar surroundings. While the snack is served at almost every hawker center, I had the epiphany that the experience of eating it is as much about the atmosphere as about the food.

Singaporeans are proud of local success stories, so the Ya Kun Kaya Toast chain was an obvious place to start. Named for an industrious Hainanese immigrant who landed here in 1926, worked in a coffee stall, and eventually founded his own, it's now an institution known for thin-sliced toast, fragrant jam, and a warm-spirited connection to its heritage.

Old kopitiams in Singapore are becoming scarce; rarer still is the communal feeling they nourish. Tong Ah Eating House is situated in the middle of a row of shophouses on a street that was formerly a red-light district. The space feels like a bingo parlor, with stackable plastic chairs and ceiling fans. Eggs bobble in a tepid bath next to the entrance. But the offerings here are a revelation: extra-thin and crispy slices, double-toasted, scraped to remove bitter char, with homemade kaya jam less sweet—and slabs of butter more abundant—than at any other coffee shop. You can even order French toast kaya, if healthy living is of no concern to you. Regulars consider it *damn shiok, lah* (an extreme pleasure to eat).

Kaya toast began to influence my travels. One weekend I visited George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage city on the Malaysian island of Penang. Chinese temples, Peranakan mansions, colonial structures, and trompe l'oeil street murals are the big draw for most visitors. I came for the kaya, and it did not disappoint. My friend Antoinette Chia Yen Yen, who is from Sarawak but is always up for an adventure, joined me on the visit and guided me into the labyrinths of the old city to Toh Soon Cafe, an open-air kaya kitchen operating in an alleyway, shaded by tarps hanging overhead. This was the real deal: men squatting down to toast bread over a charcoal fire inside steel oil drums. A dozen plastic tables crammed into the alley, and the aroma of kaya hovered like a genie over the bustling scene. Here the toast was sliced into dunking strips and



A beloved Singaporean kopitiam, Heap Seng Leong serves a classic breakfast of coffee and kaya toast.

Breakfast spots in Singapore

HEAP SENG LEONG

Entering this *kopitiam* is “like stepping into a time portal,” writes Leslie Tay, the Singaporean behind food blog *ieatishootipost.sg*. “We need places like this so that our kids know where we came from and what it was like in the past.” 10 North Bridge Rd.

TONG AH EATING HOUSE

Local *kaya*-philes love the extra-crispy toast served at this iconic kopitiam located on a street lined with old shophouses. Breakfast is not the only specialty; dinner features home-style dishes. 35 Keong Saik Rd.

CHIN MEE CHIN

For deliciously messy breakfasts served on weathered marble tables, try this old-school kopitiam in the Joo Chiat neighborhood, which specializes in toasted buns topped with custardy kaya jam. 204 East Coast Rd.

the runny eggs served in cups. The jam was so fresh I ate three helpings and ordered another *tapow* (to go).

After more than three years of obsessing over breakfast, I reached the apotheosis of my kaya quest. A search for the oldest kopitiam in Singapore led me to Heap Seng Leong, a flashback to a world of “uncles” in pajama pants, milk-can ashtrays, and old men lingering over newspapers as the day turns from balmy to incendiary. Decades of dietary fads have gone unnoticed at this kopitiam, which specializes in *kopi gu you*—coffee with an oil slick of butter on top. The taste is just what you’d expect: black coffee plus butter. There’s a reason you don’t do this at home. The most amazing thing I saw here was the ancient proprietor hand-slicing a loaf of bread the size of a cocker spaniel. It was not the best kaya toast, but the improbable fact that this mid-century holdover is in business at all is astonishing.

When friends visited me, the first thing I would do is whisk them off to Tong Ah. I told myself I was showing them a Singaporean secret. But I was also revealing a bit about myself, and that’s the point of obsessions.

My passion for kaya—a food item my father found so inscrutable he put it on ice cream—really has nothing to do with jam. And everything to do with my love for and fascination with Singapore and Singaporeans. Along the way I discovered how to disappear into a faraway place and come away with a rich experience.

Share your own tales of travel obsession with us at natgeotravel@natgeo.com.

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GO WITH NAT GEO

PERU'S SACRED VALLEY



Beyond Machu Picchu

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba is a gateway to Peru's bountiful Sacred Valley

By Sarah Erdman

The Urubamba River curves through Peru's Sacred Valley, eddying and splashing toward Machu Picchu. Tourists seem to follow its momentum. They touch down in Cusco and hurtle through the Sacred Valley to get to that Inca citadel in the sky. Beyond a token stop at an alpaca farm or a weaving workshop, the valley rarely gets more than a passing night's stay. Anywhere else, this fertile land of quinoa, sweet potato, and purple corn would be the main attraction. Here, ignored by most tourists, Quechua farmers tend their crops amid Inca ruins, 16th-century Spanish churches, and mountains said to embody the spirits of ancestors.

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a National Geographic Unique Lodge, celebrates this often overlooked region. Lodge owners José Koechlin and Denise Guislain-Koechlin combined Inca-inspired masonry with Spanish colonial architecture, commissioned locals to weave textiles, and worked with area farmers to plant a 10-acre organic garden filled with native species such as golden berries and tree tomatoes. Guests go biking in the valley; learn to make *chicha*, or corn beer, on site; or follow a naturalist on a lantern-lit hike. And on their return to the lodge, Alfredo Quispetupa concocts a glorious pisco sour at the hacienda bar as the sun sets on the Andes.

LODGE ESSENTIALS

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba offers 36 rooms and suites with panoramic views. Naturalists provide information on lodge conservation projects, including Inkaterra Asociación, which helps protect the biodiversity and local communities of the Peruvian Andes.

BOOK IT

To reserve your stay, call 888-701-5486 or visit natgeolodges.com/explore.

Enter Cloud Nine in Ecuador

The glorious Chocó: Just an hour from Quito's urban core, lies a land of birds, bears and astounding biodiversity ...

The cloud forests that drape the rolling mountainsides to the northwest of Quito's Metropolitan District hold record-breaking biological diversity. An enigmatic world covered in mist where thousands of tree, plant and orchid species abound and unfathomable bird variety thrives. Many municipal, state-run reserves and private

conservation projects harbor excellent opportunities for adventures in nature, and a range of accommodation options for all budgets.

World of Birds

Quito is one of the most megadiverse cities on our planet in terms of bird species: a world bird capital, home to an unparalleled variety. Countless bird-lovers have turned Ecuador's capital into one of the highest-ranking bucket-list destinations in the world.

Bear Necessities

The Andean Spectacled Bear, the only South American bear, is one of the Quito region's most emblematic creatures. It's amazing to think that over 45 bears live in the wild just 2 hours from the city. The city's Andean Bear Conservation Program aims to consolidate a corridor for bears, through research, monitoring, education, communication and sustainable management.

Although elusive, several conservation projects exist that allow visitors the opportunity to spot bears in the wild, or at least see them through the images captured by dozens of camera traps.



PHOTO & TEXT BY NANMAGAZINE

SMART CITIES NEWCASTLE, AUSTRALIA



It takes a strong city to reinvent itself. When the recession forced Newcastle's steel, coal, and copper industries to downsize or close, the city took a creative approach to the problem. Novocastrians (as Newcastle, Australia, residents are known) channeled their artistic energies by developing

Renew Newcastle and Newcastle Now, organizations that take run-down spaces and lend them as pop-ups for makers such as milliners, writers, painters, and furniture designers. By showcasing its craftsmanship, Newcastle has positioned itself as a regional hub of innovation.

Located a hundred miles north of Sydney, Newcastle is Australia's seventh largest city. The revitalization has colored the city with the cultural vibe of Melbourne and Sydney, but with a fraction of their population. "Newcastle has this

sense of discovery about it," says local Rachel Svenson. "There are lots of places to discover just by wandering."

With golden beaches, smart galleries, and organic eateries, Newcastle is drawing both residents and tourists back to the city's center.

—Carrie Miller

Soak up the sun in the Merewether Ocean Baths in Newcastle.





Eat!

ORGANIC? CHECK. LOCAL? CHECK.

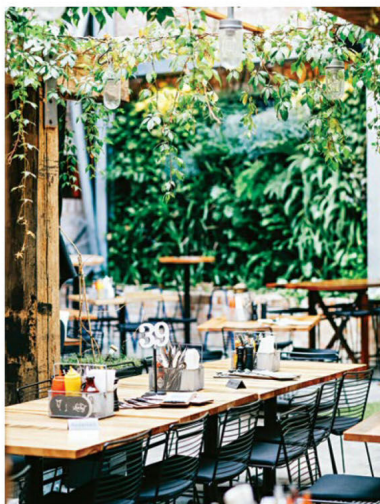
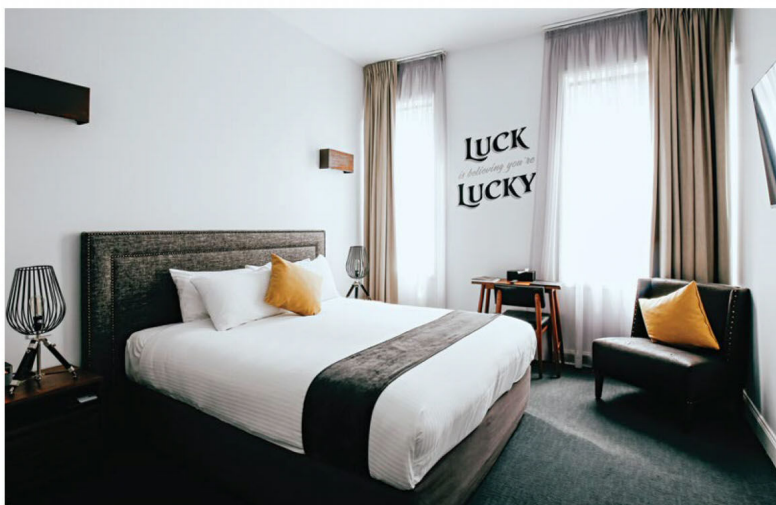
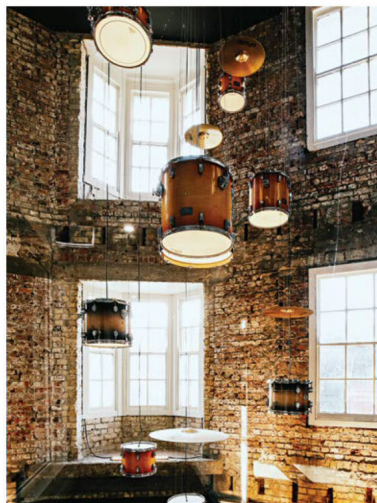
Newcastle's restaurants and cafés reflect Novocastrians' active lifestyles, broad tastes, and laid-back attitudes. The popular **Blue Door** café, located in the historic Fred Ash building, prides itself on "simple food, done well," like spiced butternut pumpkin and ricotta fritters and fried buttermilk chicken burgers. Located in a restored warehouse with timber floors and art deco details, the **Grain Store Craft Beer Café** pairs Australian craft beers with new takes on old favorites: battered barra-mundi, crab burgers, and slow-cooked brisket subs. For those who prefer surf over turf, the waterfront **Merewether Surfhouse** cooks up seafood dishes like yellow fin confit and flathead fillets.

Stay!

LIVE LIKE THE NOVOCASTRIANS

For a beach stay, the **Caves Beachside Hotel** offers an oceanfront collection of suites, villas, and townhouses. **Terraces for Tourists** are designed to help visitors live like locals, with fully furnished apartments and houses set in the historic East End of town, an easy walk from Newcastle's city center. Nestled in the central business district, **the Lucky Hotel** is quirky and affordable, with on-site entertainment like courtyard movie screenings, live music, and poker nights.

From top left: shopping selection at Willows Home Traders, eclectic decor at the Lucky Hotel, and breakfast at the Blue Door café



Play!

BEACHES, BIKES, AND BRIMMING COCKTAILS

With Newcastle's generally sunny weather and long stretches of beaches, residents don't shy away from outdoor activities. The **Bathers Way Coastal Walk** is a three-mile historical and scenic hike, leading from Nobbys Headland past heritage sites that make up Newcastle's history. Or stop by one of **Interbike's** 24-hour, swipe-and-ride bike share terminals, and pedal out to the **Merewether Ocean Baths**, the largest open-air ocean baths, or public pools filled with seawater, in the Southern Hemisphere. Wrap up the day with kayaking or a cocktail in the revived industrial **Honeysuckle area**, now a harborside hot spot of restaurants, bars, and public spaces.

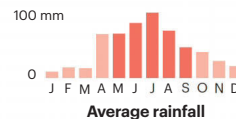
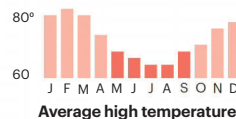
Shop!

PARADISE FOR ETSY ENTHUSIASTS

The Emporium is Renew Newcastle's revamp of a former department store building, packed with distinctive shops like Jodie Louise Millinery, CCY Studio's handmade leather goods, and With Love Bree-Lacey's vintage-inspired clothing. **Darby Street** features more than a hundred independently owned businesses and boutiques, like Cooks Hill Books & Records and fashion destination Abicus, and is also stocked with plenty of eateries to help you fuel up for more shopping. Keep an eye out for Sunday markets at the **Newcastle Showground**, such as the Newcastle Farmers Market and Makers Market, where you can find everything from quilts to spices to produce.

OFF-SEASON ESCAPE CAPE TOWN

MAY TO SEPTEMBER: The Southern Hemisphere winter is the perfect time to explore Cape Town, South Africa. Temperatures are mostly moderate, and visitors can take on the city without having to brave crowds of tourists or shell out for the peak pricing markup.



Cape Town's Camps Bay is prime for biking in cooler seasons.

DINING

Cape Cuisine

Winter in Cape Town serves up a smorgasbord of more affordable tasting menus and available tables at some of the city's top restaurants. Chef-owner Harald Bresselschmidt creates menus featuring seasonal ingredients at Aubergine in the historic Gardens district. "South African black truffles lend themselves to veal and springbok dishes, perfect for winter," he says. At French hot spot La Mouette, chef Henry Vigar prepares a special winter six-course tasting menu that includes mushrooms with salt-and-pepper chestnuts and house-barbecued beef brisket with fermented carrots and cauliflower-cheese puree.

LODGING

Stay in a Silo

Cape Town will welcome its most exciting new hotel in years when the Silo opens at the V&A Waterfront in March. The 28-room accommodation will reside on the top six floors of a historic 1924 silo complex that also houses the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (due to open in September). Rates will start at 12,000 rand (about \$850) in May (versus 18,000 rand/\$1,274 in the high season).

ACTIVITY

Winter Wave Rider

"Because of the shape of the peninsula, we always have waves in Cape Town," explains the owner of Gary's Surf School, Gary Kleynhans. "But winter is when we get all the swell because of the cold fronts." So suit up, since water temperatures hover around 60 degrees, and head to Muizenberg Beach in False Bay, where the waves are big enough to be thrilling, but gentle enough for beginners.

FLIGHTS

Routing Rewards

There are more options for flying to South Africa than ever before. South African Airways flies nonstop to Johannesburg from New York JFK and Delta flies nonstop from Atlanta. Discounted business-class fares (around \$2,400 round-trip versus the \$6,000-\$10,000 norm) on a variety of carriers are also periodically available if you can get to a Canadian hub such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.

6TH ANNUAL Best OF THE World

21 Must-See Places for 2017

Best for Culture: 1. Papua New Guinea 2. Chengdu, China 3. Guadeloupe 4. Georgia
5. Canton Uri, Switzerland 6. Cradle of Humankind, South Africa 7. Malta
Best for Nature: 8. Baja California National Marine Parks, Mexico 9. Via Dinarica,
Western Balkans 10. Ecuador's Cloud Forests 11. Kauai 12. Central India's National Parks
13. Finland 14. Banff, Canada **Best for City Life:** 15. Moscow 16. Madrid
17. Anchorage 18. Cartagena 19. Hamburg 20. Marrakech 21. Seoul

*Our editors and explorers picked the world's most exciting destinations for the year ahead.
Follow the numbered illustrations on this page to launch your journey.*

Culture

GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS ON A LOCAL LEVEL

1

Papua New Guinea

Why Go Now:
Unprecedented
access to remote
villages

Time ignored much of Papua New Guinea, or P.N.G., an isolated and rugged Garden of Eden. Located in the South Pacific north of Australia, P.N.G. includes the eastern half of the

world's second biggest island, New Guinea, and about 600 small islands. For indigenous cultures in secluded villages, life goes on pretty much as it has for centuries. Recent grassroots tourism initiatives, such as lodging and travel website VillageHuts.com, make it a bit easier for adventurers to visit P.N.G.'s untamed rain forests—home to threatened tree kangaroos and Queen Alexandra's bird-wing, the largest butterfly in the world—volcanic fjords, and vibrant coral reefs. At Tufi Resort, new sea kayaking

expeditions allow visitors to paddle between out-of-the-way villages and stay overnight in local guesthouses. And Walindi Resort will offer live-aboard dive trips in 2017 to the outlying Witu Islands and Father Reef, both packed with whirling schools of big colorful fish.

—Maryellen
Kennedy Duckett





Tribesmen in Mount Hagen,
Papua New Guinea,
take part in a sing-sing,
a tribal gathering full of
chants and dancing.

Chengdu, China

Why Go Now: Savor a UNESCO City of Gastronomy

2 Chengdu is hardly a fabled destination in Asia—even though this fogbound river town of ten million is the only city in China known by the same name for more than two millennia. But if you’ve been to a Sichuan restaurant anywhere on Earth, you can attest to the region’s legendary culinary specialties: kung pao chicken, twice-cooked pork, tea-smoked duck, ma po tofu, hot pot, and more.

It’s no wonder that UNESCO designated Chengdu its first Asian “City of Gastronomy,” citing it as “the cradle and center of Sichuan cuisine.” At street stalls, markets, and food courts, a panoply of dishes—from dumplings to duck tongues—is bathed in generous helpings of bright red heat, provided by the famed Sichuan peppercorns. Temper the surfeit of spice at one of Chengdu’s numerous teahouses, among China’s most authentic. As the hub of booming western China, more than three hours’ flight from coastal Shanghai, Chengdu has seen its white-painted back streets largely overtaken by glass-walled office towers.

Yet there are plenty of picturesque between-meals stops, and five World Heritage sites nearby. The thatched cottage of acclaimed Tang dynasty poet Du Fu exudes tranquillity, while the Wide and Narrow Alley district brims with restaurants, bars, and shops selling handicrafts. And Chengdu’s other leading claim to fame is as the gateway to panda country—just a hundred miles from the Wolong Nature Reserve, a panda breeding and research center that is also home to the rare red panda. In Chengdu, antidote to an increasingly bland China, everything seems cast in a passionate crimson. —*John Krich*



Cooks in downtown Chengdu keep busy preparing some of Sichuan’s famed specialties: hot-and-sour rice noodles and steamed dumplings.



Guadeloupe

Why Go Now: Be moved by Caribbean heritage

Guadeloupe, or “Gwada,” has one foot in France, one in the Caribbean, and a rich culture all its own. Located between Dominica and Antigua, the five-island archipelago moves to the beat of Gwoka, a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage art form combining Guadeloupean Creole lyrics, African call-and-response singing,

traditional Ka drum rhythms, and dancing. The sounds (along with the food, art, and most things Gwada) braid the islands’ Afro-Indian, Afro-French, and Afro-Caribbean traditions.

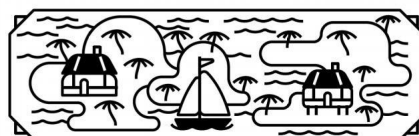
Learn how the African slave trade shaped Guadeloupe’s distinctive culture at Mémorial ACTe, opened in 2015. This museum and research center, built on the site of a former sugar factory, uses location-based beacon technology to track your movements and trigger powerful audiovisual displays, such as actor portrayals of slaves, slave owners, and abolitionists.

—MKD

Georgia

Why Go Now: Listen up for great American music

4 Old sweet songs aren’t the only tunes keeping Georgia on music lovers’ minds. The Peach State’s current homegrown performers—including Young Jeezy and Luke Bryan—are building on the lyrical legacy of legends such as James Brown and Ray Charles. Hear live music or join a jam session in the cozy confines of the Historic Holly Theater in Dahlonega or Atlanta’s Apache Café. Discover the roots of the Georgia sound in Macon, where Jessica Walden and her husband, Jamie Weatherford, operate Rock Candy Tours. “It’s no coincidence that Little Richard, Otis Redding, and the Allman Brothers all tapped into the city’s soul, found their voice, and created a sound from it,” says Walden. Rock on at one of Georgia’s 75 music festivals, such as June’s AthFest in Athens, home of the B-52s and R.E.M. —MKD



5

Canton Uri, Switzerland

Why Go Now: Zoom through the world's longest rail tunnel

Canton Uri is the Swiss army knife of Alpine travel experiences. Craving clanking cowbells and traditional cheesemaker huts? Check and check. How about snow-capped peaks and wildflower meadows? Uri's got you covered. Dream of soaring over glacial lakes in a gondola or peering into the abyss on a gravity-defying train ride? Yep. That's Uri too. Then there's Gotthard Pass (elevation 6,909 feet), a magnet for James Bond wannabes itching to drive ridiculous hairpin turns. Their route of choice—an old cobbled road over the Alps—is the adrenaline-pumping way to travel from German-speaking Uri to Italian-speaking Canton Ticino. But it's the slow lane compared with the new Gotthard Base Tunnel. The 35-mile-long rail tunnel (longest of its kind in the world) took 17 years to build yet takes only 17 minutes to zip through via high-speed train. —MKD



In Switzerland's Canton Uri, the Désalpe festival marks the cattle's annual autumn descent from summer mountain pastures.

6

Cradle of Humankind, South Africa

Why Go Now: Pay a visit to your ancestors' cave

It turns out you can go home again. Rewind any family story way, way back some two to three million years and you'll arrive at

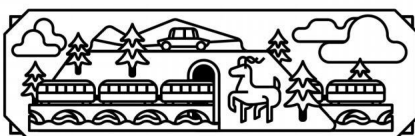
the Cradle of Humankind. Located under the rolling Highveld grassland an hour northwest of Johannesburg, the sprawling subterranean boneyard provides a window into human evolutionary history. Within the Cradle's limestone caves and dolomite sinkholes, scientists have discovered one of the world's greatest sources

of hominin fossils. Get an overview of the discoveries at Maropeng (Setswana for "returning to the place of origin"), the Cradle of Humankind's burial mound-shaped visitors center. Then dig deeper on a guided tour of Sterkfontein Caves, site of the longest running (five days a week since 1966) archaeological excavation.

—MKD

GO WITH NAT GEO

National Geographic Expeditions' 12-day "Namibia and Botswana by Private Air" trip visits the Cradle of Humankind, in South Africa. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687



Best for Culture

7

MALTA IN MOTION

A LAND OF HERITAGE TAKES A MODERN TURN

BY LISA ABEND • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX WEBB



I'M SURROUNDED BY GAME OF THRONES T-SHIRTS.

Thirty or so English-speaking visitors have gathered for a tour of *Thrones* sites in Malta's ancient fortified town of Mdina, and right now we're standing on Pjazza Mesquita. Before us hang the balconies where scheming Lord Baelish displayed his prostitutes and Ned Stark, lord paramount of the North, is horrified to find his wife. Everything around us—walls, arches, paving stones—is golden limestone, interrupted only by green shutters and black iron curving over windows.

Malcolm Ellul, a 41-year-old Maltese businessman and actor, points to a very un-Westeros mailbox.

"That's practically the only thing they had to change," he says—"they" referring to the film crew for the hit TV series. "Otherwise, you see? Malta doesn't need anything done to it."

This isn't the sentiment I had hoped to hear. On my first trip to Malta, several years ago, I'd been struck by how out-of-date the place seemed, not just old but old-fashioned. Its history as home to the Knights of Malta and, subsequently, a British protectorate (English remains an official language), was fascinating. But there was something about this Mediterranean island nation perched between Sicily and North Africa that seemed stuck, its food and arts scenes undeveloped, its fashions several years behind, its tourism aimed largely at northern Europeans hell-bent on sunburns and hangovers. Even Malta's politics seemed retrograde: Divorce was illegal until 2011.

But in the intervening years I had heard rumors of change. The European Commission chose Malta's capital, Valletta, as one of two European Capitals of Culture for 2018. Malta's government finally legalized divorce. New boutique hotels were opening, major cultural initiatives were being launched, and, yes, *Game of Thrones* began filming here. Together, all of these changes had me wondering: After so much time being known

primarily for sunshine and knights, was Malta finally entering the modern world?

I ARRIVE IN VALLETTA as the sun is setting and head straight out to retrace a walk I made on my last visit inside the city's fortified walls. Narrow streets are lined with baroque buildings, all ornate porticoes and wrought-iron balconies. Various doorways bear a plaque commemorating some long-ago event or person. Vintage hand-painted signs mark shops—Paul's Store, Smiling Prince Bar—long departed. When I reach the Grand Harbour, the cobalt expanse of the Mediterranean Sea gives way to an astonishing panorama of tightly packed houses, church domes, and fortresses. It looks either medieval or Meereen—a city from the show—I'm not sure which.

Even for the Old Continent, Malta is dense with history. A republic centered on three inhabited islands at a key crossroads location in the Mediterranean, it has been a strategic prize about as long as there has been strategy. Archaeological remains place its original inhabitants in the Neolithic period; a progression of Phoenicians, Romans, and Arabs subsequently populated it. Malta really came into its own in the 16th century, when Holy Roman Emperor Charles V granted its two main islands, Malta and Gozo, to the order of the Knights with the hope that it would help protect Rome. Several sieges and 150 years of British colonialism later you have a place that bears hallmarks—an Arabic-inflected vocabulary, a taste for fish-and-chips—of the many cultures that have passed through it.

I learn this at *The Malta Experience*, an "audio-visual spectacular" that recounts the invasions (Roman, Arab, Napoleonic) and repulsions (Ottoman, Fascist, Nazi) that make up the better part of the country's history; and at *Malta 5D*, a shorter film that

compensates for what it lacks in historical detail with lurching seats and wafts of Maltese bread scents piped into the auditorium as a bakery appears on-screen (motion and smell being, apparently, the fourth and fifth dimensions).

"There is a claustrophobia that is born of being so small, so packed in, and so old," says Kenneth Scicluna, a veteran Maltese filmmaker whose work is deeply informed by his homeland. A sign outside the café where we meet up advertises craft beers, but instead of bearded bartenders pouring hoppy brews to an adult clientele, all I see around me is a nondescript interior filled with rambunctious children.

"I always have this sense of being watched," Scicluna adds. "And not only by other people, but by the place itself. It's so old. It knows things."

I love the image of a place that watches over its residents,

Steeped in history yet full of lighthearted moments—such as lofting orange balls branded with the name of local beverage Kinnie—Valletta, Malta's capital, looks forward to its turn on the world stage as a 2018 European Capital of Culture. Opening pages: An angler tries his luck in one of Valletta's many inlets fronted by honey-hued stone buildings.

but for Scicluna, so much history can impede cultural change. "We are a country that wants so desperately to be modern but doesn't always know how. There is always the weight of the past getting in the way."

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO LESSEN that weight in this island nation? I think back to my first visit to Bilbao, Spain, in the 1990s, when its Guggenheim museum was just going up. Few could imagine that architect Frank Gehry's undulating titanium walls and Richard Serra's curving sculptures would transform a city that had been defined by its industrial history. Yet many now consider the Basque metropolis a cultural hub, with exciting restaurants, a lively market, and a number of new construction projects, all jump-started by a museum that draws more than a million arts-minded visitors a year. So significant has the impact been that the city inspired a phenomenon: the "Bilbao effect," when a place remakes itself by attracting a world-class cultural institution, preferably designed by a high-powered architect.

Valletta recently got its own piece of starchitecture when powerhouse architect Renzo Piano reimagined the 16th-century



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city gate as a dramatic, clean-lined breach in the old walls. He flanked it with twin staircases that rise like austere wings and designed a new parliament building just inside, fronted with a perforated facade that some critics have compared to a cheese grater but that strikes me as both imposing and elegant.

I'm marveling at the coherence of Piano's complex when I spy a young man eating a sandwich nearby. Ramon Vella is no fan of the new construction. "I know the experts say it's art," he says, "but it doesn't fit the culture of the city."

He's not alone in feeling that way; the Maltese president who initiated the project lost an election in part because of it.

Piano anticipated some resistance. In an interview with the local *Times of Malta* newspaper he noted, "I like the idea of joining past and future, history and modernity. We don't want a monumental parliament; that's not the spirit. It's more about welcoming people, about having spaces that are accessible."

"I wouldn't call it conservatism per se," says Toni Attard, director of strategy for Arts Council Malta. "But there is a strong bias in favor of heritage and tradition here. People will get more outraged over a bastion that comes crumbling down than over an artist packing his bags and leaving."

So what would change that mind-set? Injecting more diverse ideas and voices into the country's insular culture would help. Arts Council Malta, Attard explains, is trying both, increasing public funding for the arts from 100,000 euros to 1.6 million and training artists internationally so they may return home to invigorate the local culture.

"This may not be the most artistically refined cultural scene yet," says Attard. "But it's changing. There's been quite a buzz building in the past few years."

Contributing to that buzz is Valletta's selection as a European Capital of Culture. For a tiny nation like Malta, this designation offers an opportunity to show the world what it's up to.

"I think the selection panel was struck by the novelty we represent," says Karsten Xuereb, executive director of the Valletta 2018 Foundation. "Malta is known for its heritage and history; the panelists were curious to see how we'd spin it in a contemporary sense. Because you know what? The past is past. This gives us a chance to articulate what it means to us today to be Maltese."

Among other things, Xuereb told me, the designation will bring fresh cultural programming, a new contemporary art museum in what centuries ago was lodging for Italian knights, and a design center fashioned from an old slaughterhouse. Valletta 2018 also has inspired a reworking of the 19th-century covered market into a modern food hall that will combine produce stalls and trendy places to eat. I can hear hammers and drills busy at work as I walk past it on Merchants Street.

All this change prompts me to look for more in Gozo, Malta's second largest island. Not as populated as Malta proper, it has a higher percentage of agricultural land, which confers a notably





Pairing wood and stone, curves and planes, Malta's new parliament and city gate complex, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, announces a contemporary sensibility while honoring this island nation's heritage.

Best for Culture

Bathers cool off in one of the many natural sea pools that scallop Malta's coast, known also for its underwater grottoes.







rural feel. Not surprisingly, the past remains decidedly present. In fact, my first stop takes me as far into the past as I can go.

The Neolithic temples at Ġgantija date back more than 5,500 years, making them older than Egypt's pyramids. Many temple altars still stand, perhaps once decorated with the rotund figurines I'd seen at the National Museum of Archaeology, in Valletta. Pausing before one temple altar under the baking sun, I feel a chill run through me—all the millennia, all the ancient people who once stood, awed, in this very same spot.

In its own way Gozo is looking to the future. Instead of the nightclubs and bustling beaches that draw so many vacationers to resort areas on the larger island, Gozo is developing ecotourism and other forms of experiential travel. Chief among these is diving; the British magazine *Diver* recently named Gozo the world's second best diving destination (after the Red Sea), thanks to crystalline waters and many underwater caves and tunnels.

Yet even here, says David Hayler-Montague, a Brit who moved to Gozo six years ago and opened the Bubbles Dive Centre, the real appeal is the past. "What I love about this place is how it seems like it could be 30 years ago. Things aren't built up as they are on the other island, and people here are so laid-back, so

**PAUSING BEFORE ONE
TEMPLE ALTAR UNDER
A BAKING SUN,
I FEEL A CHILL RUN
THROUGH ME—
ALL THE MILLENNIA,
ALL THE ANCIENT PEOPLE
WHO ONCE STOOD,
AWED, IN THIS VERY
SAME SPOT.**



A lifeguard station on Sliema beach flaunts bold colors—and a peekaboo window. Malta sunseekers can choose between sand and stone beaches. Tuned up, a marching band (left) accompanies locals as they celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel near a church in the town of Żurrieq.

decent, and so honest. The days on Gozo just seem to happen.”

Though I’m not a diver, Hayler-Montague invites me to accompany a group he is escorting to the Blue Hole, Gozo’s top dive site. We drive to a large parking lot bordered on one side by the sea and on the other by a sere landscape. Scrambling down rocks to the water’s edge, we find a pool that marks the entrance to the Blue Hole. We also find the Azure Window, a massive arch carved from the limestone by centuries of wind and water.

The divers sink beneath the water (later one will tell me it’s the best dive he’s ever made, with its grottoes), but I’m transfixed by that rock formation. Around me, kids jump into the turquoise sea. It is the most beautiful swimming hole I have ever seen.

And also, it turns out, the most famous. Two days later I’m back on the main island, Malta, in its ancient capital, Mdina, listening to Malcolm Ellul point out sites where *Game of Thrones* had filmed during its first season. When a girl asks why the

show hadn’t returned to film in Malta, Ellul looks momentarily pained. The scene in which Princess Daenerys marries the warlord Drogo was shot in front of the Azure Window, he explains. To make it look like a Dothraki desert, the producers laid down tons of sand, which damaged an environmentally sensitive area and resulted in fines against the local production company. Yet Ellul thinks there will be other opportunities. After all, *Assassin’s Creed*, the new movie based on the insanely popular video game, was filmed partly in Valletta.

ON MY FINAL NIGHT I RETURN TO VALLETTA. Renzo Piano, in addition to redesigning the old city gate and the parliament building, recast the once ornate Royal Opera House, which was largely destroyed in World War II by German bombs. Piano’s design kept the structure roofless, a choice that, dismayingly to some Maltese, makes it appear unfinished—but leaves it open to the oranges of a dawn sky and the pinks and purples of dusk. Piano said that he wanted to create “a place of virtual sound and virtual setting, including all the possible techniques that are absolutely new... a way to push Malta into the future.”

I stand outside this reinvention as strains from Tchaikovsky’s

Best for Culture

“Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” fill the night. To be honest, I have not found the degree of innovation I came looking for. There are no daring art galleries or hip neighborhoods, at least not equivalent to those in Brooklyn or London. No café spends 15 minutes on proper “pour-over” coffee, and few do truly new things with food. My most memorable moments connected with Malta’s past, not its future—especially a nighttime walk in Victoria, the largest city on Gozo, where, from the medieval citadel I took in a 360-degree view of the entire island. In the near distance, every few miles, I could make out the glowing dome of a church; beyond, I spied the sea’s edge. It was a sublime moment that came from an unmediated communion, I thought, with history. Later I learned the citadel had undergone extensive renovation and reopened to the public only two days before my visit. What had so moved me was not the unadulterated past but the past lightly reimagined for the present.

Then I remembered something Toni Attard had told me: that along with trying to build new cultural institutions, his Arts Council Malta was investing in a reinvigoration of the old. “The last purpose-built theater in Malta was under British rule,” he’d said. “We could spend the next ten years waiting to build a new one, or we could do what we did—maximize what is available.”

So Malta may not experience the Bilbao effect. But perhaps I’d been wrong to think of the creation of some brand-new, clearly contemporary work as the only possible sign of modernization. The past and the future are not opposites, after all, but points along a continuum. Change doesn’t have to come only in the form of rupture. It can come gently, in small and slow reinventions of what has been.

Leaving the Azure Window in Gozo, I’d hopped in a taxi. The driver, Florian, asked what I thought of the formation. I went on about its beauty. He said geologists had just tested it and found that the top of the arch is so worn, it could collapse within months. I’d expressed my dismay; Florian agreed.

“But,” he’d added, “you know what we Maltese are like. We are used to making things from the past. So it’s not the Azure Window anymore? We’ll call it the Azure Door.”

Copenhagen-based journalist **LISA ABEND** ([@LisaAbend](#)) writes often about Europe for such publications as *Bon Appétit*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. **ALEX WEBB**’s photography has appeared in *National Geographic* and *Geo*.

GO WITH NAT GEO

Discover Valletta’s old town and the Neolithic temples of Ġgantija, both World Heritage sites, with National Geographic Expeditions’ “Voyage to Antiquity: Exploring Malta and Sicily Aboard the *Sea Cloud*,” a 15-day cruise on a 1930s square-rigger. Highlights in Sicily include Syracuse’s ancient ruins and the volcanic isle of Stromboli. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687



Sundown casts playful shadows at Cockney's, a restaurant tucked into Valletta's historic district.



Malta Nights

ART DECO DIGS

Hotel Phoenicia Malta

The grande dame of Malta lodgings, this 1930s deco gem near Valletta's City Gate completes a renovation early in 2017. Notable feature: more than seven acres of gardens. Past guests have included Queen Elizabeth II and actor Joaquin Phoenix. 36 rooms; from \$165. campbellgrayhotels.com/phoenicia

OLD WORLD RETREAT

Tano's Boutique Guesthouse

Its location near Valletta's new parliament building makes this lodging in an 18th-century palazzo an ideal base in Malta's capital. Guests choose from six rooms; a roof terrace offers views of Grand Harbour. From \$125. tanos-boutique-guesthouse-valletta.bedspro.com

GOING COUNTRY

Razzett Abela

You'll go local at this cozy B&B, known as Lisa's Farmhouse, on Malta's second island, Gozo. Its two guest rooms look out on trees—the B&B sits across from public gardens—and a pool. From \$76. visitgozo.com

Malta Bites

PASTA BY HAND

Capistrano

Malta has no shortage of Italian restaurants—Sicily, after all, is the closest large land body—but this pretty spot in the heart of the capital, with its beautifully prepared fish and handmade pastas (the rabbit tortelloni is especially luscious), stands out from the rest. capistranorestaurant.com

CHEESE AND "OLIVES"

Leglign

The tasting menu in this snug basement wine bar on Saint Lucia Street offers the perfect introduction to Maltese cuisine, from the salty sheep's milk cheese called *gbejna* to wine-braised beef rolls known as "beef olives."

EAT AND LEARN

Nenu the Artisan Baker

With its life-size re-creation of a traditional Maltese bakery (complete with mannequins), a "discovery room," a kid's corner, and cooking classes, Nenu serves up both culinary education and an evocative venue in which to try Malta's classic stuffed bread. nenuthebaker.com

Nature

WILD EXPERIENCES IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Baja California National Marine Parks, Mexico

Why Go Now:
Applaud a conservation success story

Close encounters of the ginormous marine kind are common in the waters off Mexico's fingerlike

Baja California peninsula. Baja is bordered to the west by the Pacific Ocean and to the east by the Sea of Cortez (also known as the Gulf of California), where behemoths of the sea—whales, great white sharks, and manta rays with wingspans up to 20 feet—and a variety of fish congregate. Twenty years ago many of these species were on the brink of extinction due to overfishing and pollution. Partnerships between local communities and the government helped turn the tide with the creation of Cabo Pulmo, Guadalupe Island, Revillagigedo Archipelago, and San Ignacio Lagoon marine reserves.

Today San Ignacio Lagoon is the primary calving ground for eastern Pacific gray whales. And Cabo Pulmo—widely considered one of the world's greatest ecological comeback stories—teems with marine life, its total fish biomass rebounding more than 400 percent since fishing was banned in 2000. —Maryellen Kennedy Duckett



A large-scale photograph of a massive school of jackfish, likely Pacific jackfish, swimming in the clear blue water of the Sea of Cortez. The fish are densely packed, filling most of the frame, and their silvery bodies catch the light, creating a shimmering effect. They are all oriented in roughly the same direction, moving towards the bottom left of the image. The background is a deep, clear blue, with some lighter patches where the water is shallower or where light reflects off the surface.

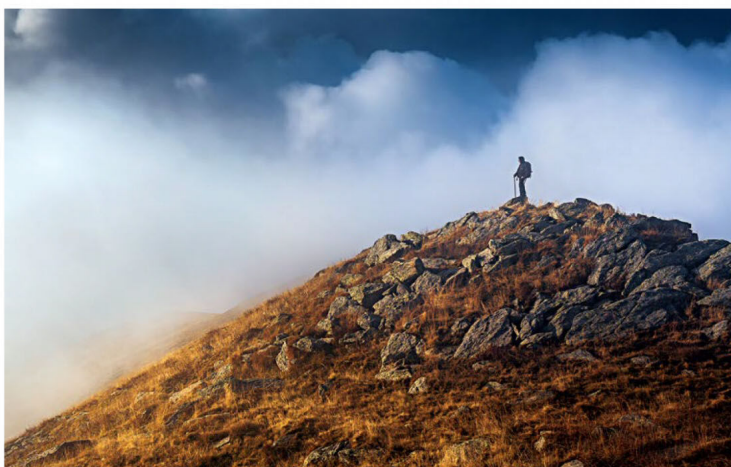
Wonder wall:
Cabo Pulmo, in the Sea of
Cortez, is known among
divers for the thousands
of jacks that school
together here.

Via Dinarica, Western Balkans

Why Go Now: Set off on the world's newest long-distance trail

9 The Balkan Peninsula's beautifully rugged wilderness areas just became more accessible. In 2017, for the first time after years of expansion, the 1,200-mile Via Dinarica trail will be completely mapped with stage information compiled from a growing community of hikers. The trek—which stitches together ancient trading and military routes—traverses the Dinaric Alps, linking the countries of the Balkan Peninsula from Slovenia, then south through Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Trekkers sleep in mountain shelters along the Adriatic Sea, or atop the region's highest peaks, or above one of the deepest gorges on the continent. But the path is also a cultural corridor, where thru-hikers, cyclists, horseback riders, paddlers, and day-trippers encounter old world traditions unchanged after five decades of communism. During homestay layovers—along the popular three-day stretch from Albania's Theth National Park to the Kosovo border, for instance—you might find yourself drinking coffee cooked in a copper pot, with a work-worn but hospitable farmer.

What was a contentious region has become the planet's most eye-opening cross-border destination. "The Via Dinarica has replaced politics with nature," says Thierry Joubert, of Green Visions, a Bosnia and Herzegovina-based tour operator. "What could be more beautiful?" —Alex Crevar



A hiker stands on the peak of Matorac in the Dinaric Alps of central Bosnia and Herzegovina, along a section of the Balkans' 1,200-mile Via Dinarica trail.



Ecuador's Cloud Forests

Why Go Now: Spot wildlife in a hotbed of biodiversity

Birders flock to the primeval cloud forests of Ecuador's Chocó region, considered some of the richest depositories of plant and animal life on the planet. Located north of Quito on the fog-shrouded Andean slopes, the biodiversity hotspot

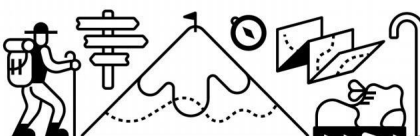
is home to hundreds of bird species, including the flashy Andean cock-of-the-rock and dazzling hummingbirds. Other wonders include a profusion of epiphytes (air plants) and rare orchids. The teddy bear-faced olinguito was identified here in 2013 as the newest mammal species in the Americas. At Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve & Lodge go on a guided night walk to spot hand-size moths and flickering fireflies. At Mashpi, a National Geographic Unique Lodge, soar through the mist on a zip-line Sky Bike or an open-air gondola for heady views of the forest canopy. —MKD

Kauai

Why Go Now: Hike authentic Hawaii

11 Kauai needed no computer-generated special effects to steal the show in the *Jurassic* movies and more than 60 other feature films. The island's aerial tours deliver cinematic views of the towering Nā Pali coast sea cliffs. But plunging deep into the Garden Island's wild side requires hitting a trail. Marked hiking paths lead into Waimea Canyon, through the shallow bogs of Alakai Swamp, and across unbelievably lush landscapes. One newer route, the five-mile Wai Koa Loop Trail, passes through the U.S.'s largest mahogany forest.

For the most meaningful treks, go with a local, says Hike Kauai With Me owner Eric Rohlfes. "A guide can take you to less traveled spots while keeping you safe and educating you on all things Hawaii." —MKD



12

Central India's National Parks

Why Go Now: Get on board the new Tiger Express safari train

Why watch *The Jungle Book* when you can live it? In the heart of India, the regal Bengal tigers immortalized in Rudyard Kipling's classic series (and subsequent Disney films) are making a roaring comeback. Seventy percent of the world's wild tiger population (up from as few as 3,200 in 2010 to 3,890 in 2015) resides in India. For wildlife watchers eager to catch a glimpse of the world's biggest cats, nothing—including Dolby Vision 3D on an IMAX screen—beats spotting the majestic creatures prowl their home turf. Thanks to wildlife and habitat-preservation initiatives, national parks in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh have become wild tiger havens. Hop aboard Indian Railways' new Tiger Express tourist train to go on safari in Bandhavgarh and Kanha, two parks where you'll have a greater chance of seeing tigers than in any other national park. —MKD



In the protection of India's Bandhavgarh National Park, this tigress gave birth to three cubs.

13

Finland

Why Go Now: Unplug in the Finnish countryside

If silence is golden, you'll discover the mother lode in Finland's state-owned protected areas. From near the Arctic Circle in Lapland (where the northern lights often brighten the 200 days of winter), through the 20,000-island Finnish archipelago, and along the rocky beaches on the mainland's southernmost tip, Finland's 40 national parks, 12 wilderness areas,

and eight national hiking areas are sanctuaries for silence seekers.

In 2017 Finns celebrate a hundred years of independence from Russia with four (winter, spring, summer, and fall) nationwide Finnish Nature Days, featuring pop-up events that might include mushroom picking or family-friendly hikes. Finland also designated

Hossa National Park as the country's 40th national park. Join the unplugged party at Torassieppi, a rustic and remote reindeer farm. It offers a program where guests voluntarily turn over their electronic devices, freeing them to focus on more self-restorative pursuits, such as reindeer sledding or snowshoeing through Lapland forests. —MKD

GO WITH NAT GEO

National Geographic Expeditions offers "Circumnavigating the Baltic Sea," a 14-day small-ship cruise that includes Poland, Sweden, and Finland. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687



Best for Nature



BANFF RETREAT

AS CANADA MARKS A MILESTONE, WE TRACK DOWN
BEAUTY AND BLISS IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

BY NORIE QUINTOS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENN ACKERMAN
AND TIM GRUBER



THE MAPLE LEAVES ARE EVERYWHERE:

red ones on white T-shirts, white ones on red T-shirts. They're screen printed on bunting, chalked onto sidewalks, painted on faces, emblazoned on dog collars.

It is July 1 in Banff, Alberta, and residents are celebrating Canada Day as the country readies for the big bash in 2017, when Canada marks its 150th anniversary as a nation. The food stalls sell bison jerky and fruit juices and vegetable samosas.



Performers are attired in costumes from many lands. Singers belt out a universal message of love and harmony in various tongues. A stranger hands me a paper Canadian flag, and we make our way to the parade route along Banff Avenue. Many of us are from the U.S. or China or India, and we know only two words in the lyrics of the national anthem. But we all gamely chime in with “O Canada” at the right spots.

From the red and the white all around me I look up and see blue and green. Banff is no ordinary small town. It sits in the middle of Canada's first and arguably best national park, 2,500 square miles of Rocky Mountain splendor carpeted with pine and spruce trees and riddled with glaciers bleeding blue into clear lakes—a space big and bold enough to support huge numbers of wildlife, including wolves, elk, moose, cougars, lynxes, black bears, and grizzlies. A thought strikes me: People are puny; nature is the grand marshal of this parade.

A FEW MONTHS AGO I HAD AN ANXIETY ATTACK. Racing heart, tight chest, cold hands. My doctor told me my cortisol levels were elevated. He prescribed vitamins and supplements to counteract the effects of a limbic hijacking and urged me to “meditate and eat dark chocolate.” So, besides popping chill pills, I'm biting into a Godiva daily and listening to a playlist of nouveau spiritualism by pop sages of the modern age. Had somebody close to me died? Was I experiencing some newly surfaced childhood trauma? Did my husband leave me for his secretary? No, no, and well, yes, but that was 20 years ago. So what was going on? Something embarrassingly trivial: I'm a recent empty nester trying to write her next chapter.

If that diagnosis is clear, the remedy is not. Our bodies have minds of their own. I felt as if I'd pushed off from one shore and hadn't quite reached the other. So I escaped to Canada, like a late-in-life runaway. I'm not unhappy. In fact, I had long anticipated this period after the kids went to college. But I live with a nagging question: What on Earth do I want?

Right now I want to be in Banff. To be outdoors, hike, make new friends, and try to lose the thoughts that cobweb my brain in my suburban home office outside of Washington, D.C. This corner of the Rockies seems to me exactly what my meditation podcasts were telling me to visualize, but here I don't have to close my eyes. I can open them.

I JOIN MY NEW BANFF FRIENDS Sally and Alison one morning for their daily stroll with their dogs up 5,500-foot-high Tunnel Mountain, just east of downtown. We're three 50-somethings in cropped yoga pants talking about nothing and everything.

Paw patrol: Two pooches are on the job by Lake Louise, a star attraction famed for its glacier-fed turquoise water. Banff's tea shops and cafés line the sunny side of the street. Opening pages: Banff happiness is a sunrise, a hammock, and the stilled translucence of Moraine Lake.





From an overlook we can see the turrets and dormers of the area's oldest and most famous lodging, the castle-on-a-hill Fairmont Banff Springs hotel. Near the summit, Sally and Alison touch the trunk of a fir tree, its gnarled bark worn smooth by other hands. They touch for sick friends, for dogs long gone, for the fallen. I touch too, "for sisterhood," I say.

I had a short unhappy marriage and a long unhappy divorce. It was a slog, marked by custody battles for our two sons, tears, and trips to the therapist. I marvel at those who do it without family and friends—I had both. Looking back on those turbulent years, I realize I had an enviable clarity of purpose. My goal was the well-being of my sons; everything else was secondary. Now I miss the focus that gave me such direction.

After the hike I meet up with Alexia McKinnon at the Banff Centre, an "arts and creativity incubator" at the base of Tunnel Mountain. McKinnon manages leadership programs for indigenous people. Hailing from the First Nations tribe of Champagne and Aishihik, up in Yukon Province, she tells me that Tunnel Mountain is also called Sleeping Buffalo Mountain. And, she adds, "according to the elders, it is a place of healing, especially for women." Really? The mountain I just climbed with the gals and touched wood—that mountain? "No doubt you felt its energy," she says.

The town of Banff, at the convergence of three valleys and two rivers, was a place of gathering and trade for native nations, including those of the Stoney Nakoda, the Blackfoot, and the Tsuut'ina. Their influence continues to resonate. When I ask McKinnon what wisdom today's elders offer, she smiles.

"They ask us to be mindful every day, to listen to our ancestors, to the trees that give us air, to the rocks that clean the water, to the animals that give us food. They remind us that we are here as part of the continuum. We are here to honor those who came before and represent those who come after." This mountain has a song, she tells me, "and I was called to the mountain by that song."

Canada is calling me. Twice this summer I've found myself north of the 48, first in Quebec and now in Banff. This land clears my head. From the mountains here in the Rockies to the prairies of Manitoba to the Atlantic coast of Newfoundland, our neighbor feels more spacious, more accepting. To this American, Canada is what we might be if we got outside more.

MY IPHONE IS DEAD. My Fitbit too. The camera still works, but it's buried in the saddlebag and out of reach. I'm not even halfway into a two-day horse-packing excursion through the dense backcountry of Lake Louise, following the trails of early

pioneers and their First Nations guides, and my fingers already seek something to tap, press, or swipe. Everywhere I turn I see Instagrammable moments, as piney woods, glacier-fed lakes, snow-covered passes, and pointed peaks assemble themselves in countless permutations of perfect.

The cowboy leading our group of four is Paul Peyto. Born in Banff, he and his wife, Sue, run Timberline Tours. Peyto has the bona fides. His great uncle Bill Peyto was one of the first wardens of Banff National Park, which was established in the late 1800s. For his contributions, his name was attached to a lake, a glacier, a mountain, a creek, and a café.

At camp the next morning, Peyto motions me over to his "weather station," really a gap in the trees with a clear view of the creek below and Molar Mountain in the distance (which looks just like its name). If a storm develops, he can see it coming. We sip coffee, boiled with the grounds. No latte foam art here.

Peyto doesn't have children, but he knows what ails today's youth. "We were always outside, always doing something—fishing, hiking, riding, skiing in wintertime. These kids now, they don't want to do anything; that's why they're all four axe-handles wide. And all the rivets and lock washers and stuff hanging off them, all them tattoos, I just shake my head."

The guy could give his own TED Talk: Head outside, do chores. It's a simple version of the "forest bathing" and digital detox that today's parenting experts advocate for nature deficit disorder and our culture of consumerism.

After the horse-packing trip I check into the log-and-stone Num-Ti-Jah Lodge, on the blue lip of Bow Lake. Built in the 1940s by another Banff pioneer and mountain man, Jimmy Simpson,

the lodge is now in the hands of Tim Whyte, who despite initial drops of rain, takes me on a hike to Bow Glacier Falls, across the lake. Raindrops soon turn into horizontal precipitation, and thunderclaps follow lightning.

"I love this," Whyte says. "I just don't do it enough." Twenty years ago he gave up the executive suite for an innkeeper's life following a bout of thyroid cancer. The work was more difficult, but he relishes it.

"Every now and then everyone needs to do a head check. Ask ourselves: Am I doing what I should be doing?"

Hiking wilderness in a tempest—is this what I should be doing? In a word, yes.

I'M ITCHING TO SEE A BEAR. Preferably in the company of Amar Athwal, a ranger at the Cave and Basin National Historic Site, centered around a series of hot springs on the outskirts of downtown. The popular area, bounded on one side by Sulphur

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Fun is a toss-up for a young member of the Harper family, on a camping trip to Banff National Park's Two Jack Lake. The Fairmont Banff Springs hotel, known as "the Castle in the Rockies," echoes its mountain setting. Newlyweds Doug and Nat Macgregor take in a Banff view from the Lake Agnes Tea House, built by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1901. A common park sight, bighorn sheep graze the shores of Lake Minnewanka.



**Verdant valleys and
broad-shouldered
mountains make Banff's
backcountry a world-class
destination for horse-
packing excursions,
led here by Timberline
Tours owner Paul Peyto.**





The high life comes naturally at the Fairmont Banff Springs hotel, where poolgoers are treated to their own private overlook of peak-flanked Bow Valley.

Mountain, abuts a wildlife corridor, so it's a good place to spot one of the world's largest omnivores. Athwal, however, takes me to see snails. Barely the size of a pea, Banff spring snails are endangered, found nowhere else in the world but in the site's sulfurous spring waters.

"See, there's one," he says, pointing to a dark, slimy corner of one pool. "My job is to protect both the bears and the snails. We've come a long way as humans that this park is here to do both." I get it. You can't just save the good-looking creatures. But I must not be as highly evolved because I can't muster much zest for the green blobs.

During the construction of the transcontinental railway in the 1880s, workers found these hot springs, long known to First Nations people. To protect them, a reserve was established in 1885. Next came a marketer's idea to build some fancy lodges and encourage travelers to board the train west. This marked the birth both of tourism and the national parks system in

Canada. At that time protected lands were dedicated more to the interests of tourism than to the ideals of conservation. First Nations peoples were evicted, big-game trophy hunting was promoted, lakes were stocked with nonnative fish species for anglers, and the hot springs were "enhanced" with swimming pools and bathhouses. Today Banff National Park is placing a priority on environmental protection and redressing wrongs done to the original inhabitants. Wildlife overpasses and underpasses cross both the Trans-Canada Highway and the Icefields Parkway, allowing safe passage to fauna, from gangly moose to elusive wolverines. Footage from hidden cameras on YouTube shows plenty of traffic on these animal highways.

The bison too are returning: Parks Canada has plans to reintroduce a herd of about 30 next year. More significantly, First Nations peoples have been active participants in the process. According to Karsten Heuer, the park's bison-reintroduction project manager, "Bison are to the plains and foothills culture

what salmon are to coastal cultures and caribou are to northern ones. Daily life revolved around the bison's movements and rhythms, and from that, entire spiritual practices were born. Bringing bison back to Banff will help provide strength to those cultures. It's a renewal."

Nice, but where's my bear?

"Be patient and present." Athwal sounds just like one of my meditation podcasts. "The most difficult thing we need to give nature is time. Nature will not show you everything at once. But she will give you enough."

BACK TO WHERE I STARTED. I am standing along the Canada Day parade route in the town of Banff with Hernan Argana, his wife, and their two daughters, some of the 2,000 immigrants from countries such as the Philippines (where the Arganas—and my parents—hail from) who make up the bedrock of this resort town's economy.

"I love Canada," says Hernan. "The people here have been so good to us. The teacher saw my children walking to school in the cold and organized a visit to the thrift shop where we could have anything we needed for free."

The family's immigrant journey was difficult. He worked in Banff alone for seven long years to get his permanent residency, wiring most of his income to pay for his youngest daughter's heart surgery in the Philippines. The Banff Western Union staff witnessed his weekly visits and took up a secret collection for his daughter's medical costs. His family reunited with him in Canada four years ago.

We watch the parade. The mayor, civic groups, and marching bands file past, followed by floats celebrating the ethnic groups that form the tapestry of Banff, and Canada—Filipinos, Japanese, Poles, Indians, Chinese, Scottish, Irish. About 20 percent of Canada's population is foreign-born (compared with 13.2 percent in the U.S. in 2014). I think of my own family's immigrant story. In the 1960s my parents traveled to the U.S. to study and later raised their three children in Washington, D.C. My sisters and I, their husbands, and our blended-race offspring represent a thoroughly American melting pot.

This land around me isn't my land, but it is a product of the same ideals. In its large tracts of wilderness and small acts of kindness, Canada turns out to be the perfect place to escape to without losing myself. To ask questions that I discover I already know the answers to. To give my better self room to grow. And to wait for the bear.

Washington D.C.-based **NORIE QUINTOS** (@noriecicerone) is an Editor at Large for Traveler. The wife-and-husband photography team of **JENN ACKERMAN** and **TIM GRUBER** (@ackermangruber) call Minneapolis home; this is their first feature assignment for Traveler.



Banff Bests

EASY RIDING

Banff Legacy Trail

This 14-mile paved route for cyclists, walkers, and in-line skaters runs from the town of Banff to the town of Canmore. Created for the 125th anniversary of Banff National Park, in 2010, it passes peaks, lakes, and forests.

PRIDE OF PLACE

Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies

Learn about the area's culture and history at this museum founded by a descendant of a pioneering Banff family and his Boston-born wife. Exhibits include snow goggles made by Bill Peyto and beaded Stoney Nakoda moccasins.

GLIDE UP, HIKE DOWN

Banff Gondola

An eight-minute gondola ride up Sulphur Mountain yields panoramic views of six mountain ranges. Keep your eyes peeled for marmots, bighorn sheep, and other wildlife.

HOOFING IT

Timberline Tours

Timberline is one of three outfitters specializing in Banff horseback tours; trips range from 1.5-hour excursions to 10-day backcountry expeditions. timberlinetours.ca

CRUISE CONTROL

Bow Valley Parkway

A scenic alternative to the Trans-Canada Highway, Bow Valley Parkway engages drive-through visitors with its viewpoints, informational signs, and picnic spots.

Adapted from the National Geographic Traveler Guide to the National Parks of Canada.

GO WITH NAT GEO

Explore Banff National Park on National Geographic Journeys with G Adventures' 12-day "Discover the Canadian Rockies" trip. Stops include Vancouver, Victoria, Whistler, and Jasper National Park. natgeojourneys.com/explore; 800-281-2354

Cities

WHAT'S HOT IN THE WORLD'S COOLEST PLACES

15

Moscow

Why Go Now:
Unpeel history
100 years from
the Bolshevik
Revolution

Like a *matriyoshka* nesting doll, Russia's splendid capital city reveals itself in layers. At Moscow's core, Red Square, the imposing Kremlin complex (with previously off-limits areas set to open to the public in 2017), and the candy-striped

domes of St. Basil's Cathedral remain popular attractions. To explore the city's less touristed outer rings, ride the Metro (famous for lavish architectural details, such as stained-glass panels and intricate mosaics). Browse galleries at Winzavod, a former wine-bottling factory turned contemporary art center. Meander around the newly redeveloped VDNKh, a nearly 600-acre Stalinist exhibition center once dubbed the "Soviet Versailles." In Gorky Park, view the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art's first triennial (March 10-May 14), featuring works from Russia's

vast and diverse artistic landscape. And even though life back in the U.S.S.R. isn't something modern Muscovites are likely to celebrate, the Communist propaganda poster collection is reason enough to visit the Russian Contemporary History Museum.

—Maryellen
Kennedy Duckett



Brightened by the State
Historical Museum
and Kazan Cathedral,
Moscow's Red Square is
far from monochrome.



Madrid

Why Go Now: Get an eyeful of urban art

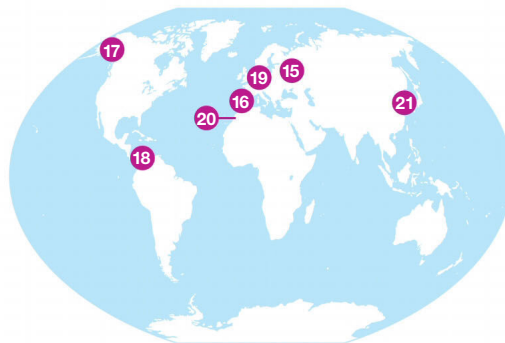
16

Spain's cosmopolitan capital city—which hosts World Pride Madrid 2017 (June 23 to July 2)—lays claim to three of the world's greatest art museums (the Prado, Reina Sofía, and Thyssen-Bornemisza), nightlife that runs into day, and manicured parks and gardens. Contemporary Madrileño street artists make their mark in neighborhoods such as bohemian Malasaña and multicultural Lavapiés.

"The local urban art scene is emerging as a new landmark where both national and international artists, many from Latin America, have seized a real opportunity to express themselves," says Chris Cung, founder of Madrid Urban Art Tours. Hit the streets with Cung to see walls, alleys, and other hardscape canvases of creativity. —MKD



Madrid's Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía exhibits the work of contemporary artists such as Japanese art star Yayoi Kusama.



Anchorage

Why Go Now: Celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Alaska Purchase

With Cook Inlet as a front porch, the Chugach Mountains out back, and five national parks nearby, Anchorage offers access to Alaska-size adventures. Add nearly round-the-clock daylight in summer, and it's possible to pack a week's worth of activities into a weekend. Try angling in the world's largest urban

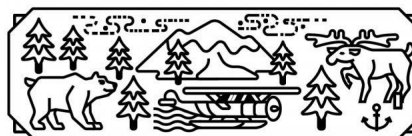
fishery. Then hike to a glacier, surf the bore tide along Turnagain Arm, spot grizzlies from a floatplane, and land back at Bear Tooth Grill for a Polar Pale Ale. At the time of the Alaska Purchase (mocked then as Secretary of State William Seward's "Folly"), the region was considered a frozen wasteland. "Today, Alaska is at the center of a number of issues of global importance," says Thomas Gokey, PR manager at the Anchorage Museum. In fall 2017 the museum opens an expanded wing and a redesigned Alaska exhibit, with multimedia elements that give visitors a taste of life in the largest U.S. state. —MKD

Cartagena

Why Go Now: Give peace a chance in Colombia

18

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos recently earned the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end 52 years of war in the country. Untouched by the conflict, Cartagena, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, has long inspired visitors and writers—in particular, novelist Gabriel García Márquez, who set his luminous *Love in the Time of Cholera* here. See what stirred him on a stroll through the walled Old City, with its brightly painted colonial mansions, bougainvillea-draped balconies, and open-air courtyard cafés filled with the infectious rhythms of *cumbia*. Márquez told the *Paris Review* in 1981 that while he garners credit for his fiction, his work is entirely drawn from real life: "The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination." —MKD



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Hamburg

Why Go Now: Dip into a waterfront world of reinvigorated architecture

Berlin may rock, but Hamburg floats. Water, water is everywhere in this former Hanseatic League city, Germany's "gateway to the world" for centuries. Located on the Elbe River near the North Sea, Hamburg is Europe's second busiest container-port (after Rotterdam) and is laced with canals. When the tide cooperates, you can cruise the canals crisscrossing Speicherstadt, one of the world's largest historic port warehouse districts. This revitalized area is part of 388-acre HafenCity, Europe's biggest inner-city development project, rising on the banks of the Elbe. HafenCity preserves elements of Hamburg's maritime past while reinventing its once grungy Old Port with stunners such as the Elbphilharmonie, opening in January. The concert hall complex was built atop a brick warehouse and now features state-of-the-art acoustics and sweeping views of the city from an 11th-story plaza. —MKD



Historic warehouses in Hamburg's Speicherstadt district are best viewed on a canal cruise.

20

Marrakech

Why Go Now: A new look at Yves Saint Laurent

French fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent plucked some of his most audacious color combinations—think saffron orange with violet purple—from the gardens, skies, and maze-like souks (markets) of Marrakech, Morocco. As Saint Laurent's partner, Pierre Bergé, told the BBC in April, "He [Saint Laurent] said, before Marrakech he saw only

in black and white." The couple first bought a home here in 1966, and the city's kaleidoscope of brilliant colors permeated Saint Laurent's collections for much of his 40-year career.

Following the designer's death in 2008, his ashes were scattered in Jardin Majorelle, the Marrakech garden compound cultivated by landscape painter Jacques Majorelle

in the 1920s and given to the public by Bergé and Saint Laurent in 1980. Next door is the couple's most recent Marrakech home, the cobalt blue Villa Oasis. Nearby, the newly built Musée Yves Saint Laurent Marrakech is one of two YSL museums (the other is in Paris) set to debut in fall 2017 with a trove of garments, sketches, and photos. —MKD

GO WITH NAT GEO

National Geographic Expeditions offers several itineraries that visit Marrakech, including the 14-day "Morocco Camel Trek and Hiking Adventure." natgeoexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687



Best for City Life

21

NON-STOP



**KINETIC, BUZZED, AND UP ALL NIGHT, SOUTH KOREA'S
CAPITAL IS A RED-HOT CENTER OF COOL**

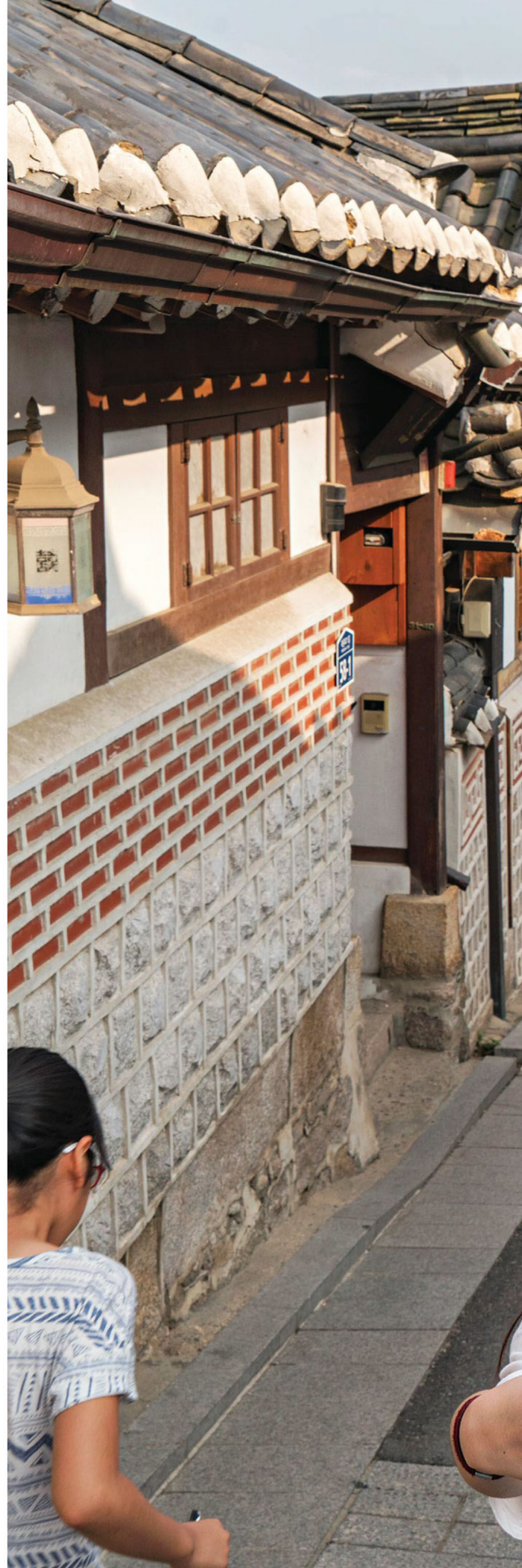
BY J. MAARTEN TROOST PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM DEAN



DO YOU KNOW THE KOREAN WAVE? ARE YOU AMONG THE MORE THAN ONE BIL- LION PEOPLE WHO TUNE IN TO WATCH THE KOREAN DRAMA DESCENDANTS OF THE SUN?

Do you swoon whenever Lee Byung-hun appears on the big screen? Do you follow, with perhaps a slightly unhealthy interest, the tangled love lives of K-pop's megastars? Are you aware that LeBron James really does drive a Kia? Have you ever found yourself, late at night, on YouTube, watching PSY's 2012 totally bonkers live performance of "Gangnam Style"—the one in Seoul, outdoors, with 80,000 delirious fans singing and dancing in unison? Did you experience the shivers?

If you answered no to these questions, well, I'm afraid you are behind the times, my friend. Your attachment to Cadillac, *The Walking Dead*, and Taylor Swift is, sad to say, a little parochial. The world has moved on. But it's not hopeless. You too can ride the zeitgeist. You just need to turn your gaze to Seoul.



Bukchon Hanok Village
is a slice of tradition
in high-tech Seoul.
Previous pages: An art
installation in Yeouido
Hangang Park promotes
a new city logo.



Best for City Life

Today, South Korea is cool. How cool? Well, the day I arrived at Incheon International Airport—a sleek new Asian hub where you can find a golf course, a skating rink, a casino, a spa and sauna, a museum, a movie theater, an arts and crafts studio, and the kind of dining options that will make you weep in despair the next time you encounter an airport Cinnabon—North Korea was busy playing with its nukes. My phone was aflame with news of hydrogen bombs, ICBMs, and American F-22 Raptors patrolling the DMZ while North Korea stood ready to launch 500,000 artillery shells into the heart of Seoul, just 35 miles from the border.

This, I thought, is not good. I had flown in from my home in Washington, D.C. I tried to imagine what it might be like if some heavily armed, psychotic dictator with provocative hair threatened our nation's capital with Armageddon from his sanctum in Baltimore. I think I can state with some certainty that there would be pandemonium. We do not do sangfroid in Washington. We are, as many have long suspected, mostly weenies. Not so the people of Seoul.

"I don't think about North Korea when I'm stirring my pasta," said my friend, who wanted to remain anonymous because she works in PR for a large Korean firm. She said this a little wistfully, not because she was especially moved by the current troubles but because she had recently given up carbs. "It's just another foreign country. And so we ignore it and get on with our lives."

I had met her in a coffee shop in Gangnam, the flashy section of Seoul south of the Han River, which acts as a kind of border of its own, neatly bisecting the city, dividing the old Seoul of palaces, markets, and government ministries from the new Seoul of cloud-scraping high-rises, cutting-edge restaurants, and tottering fashionistas. Gangnam is where many of Seoul's movers and shakers live, work, and play. They are fueled by caffeine, as evidenced by the approximately 30 coffee shops that seem to inhabit each and every block of downtown Seoul. Not a single one offers decaf. I checked. "The energy is addictive here," she noted, as we mainlined a couple of espressos. "Koreans have a continuous need for change. We have a saying here: Change everything except your wife and kids."

**"THE ENERGY IS ADDICTIVE HERE.
CHANGE. WE HAVE A SAYING: CHANGE EVERY**



This was the exhortation Lee Kun-hee, the son of the founder of Samsung, gave to his employees back in 1993 (before his own recent sex scandal), urging his company to forgo conformity and embrace risk and innovation. It worked, of course. Today, despite some embarrassing setbacks, Samsung is a tech behemoth and a major reason that South Korea leapfrogged dozens of nations to become the world's sixth largest exporter. China may be the world's factory, but increasingly it is South Korea that determines what people consume, from pop music to television dramas to smartphones to biopharmaceuticals.

And yet, it sometimes seems as if South Koreans haven't quite internalized just how revolutionary their recent history has been. One great curiosity of Seoul is the locals' insistence that they are the Italians of Asia. It's something I would hear often, and, frankly, I found it inexplicable. Yes, Koreans are expressive, emotional, impulsive—all attributes typically associated with Italians, as well as Brazilians, Lebanese, Nigerians, Tahitians, and my kids. But are the office lights still on at 11 p.m. in downtown Naples? Do little boys and girls in Milan spend their weekends

Quantum of Seoul (from left): tending bar at Manpyong Vinyl Music in the artsy Hongdae neighborhood; the swirling shapes of Dongdaemun Design Plaza, by architect Zaha Hadid and Korean design firm Samoo; chicken skewers grilling at a sidewalk stall in Yeouido Park.

at cram schools? Does anyone tune in to Italian television shows? No. I think what Koreans mean—and they are quite proud of it—is that they no longer feel tethered to the old Confucian ideals of duty, fealty, and hierarchy. And this has led to the thrum of energy one can feel crackling through modern Seoul.

The first-time visitor might find it a little intimidating. I consider myself a city boy, but greater Seoul, with its population of 25 million people, can make even the most hardened urbanite feel like a country bumpkin. I was familiar with the long workday (well, not personally, but I know people), but I didn't realize that in South Korea this extends to infants. Korean babies are the most sleep deprived little people in the world. And, having spent some time in the megacities of China, I thought I understood the kind of scale that boggles the mind. But did you know that, after Tokyo, Seoul has the highest concentration of

KOREANS HAVE A CONTINUOUS NEED FOR THING EXCEPT YOUR WIFE AND KIDS."





**CHINA MAY BE
THE WORLD'S
FACTORY, BUT
INCREASINGLY
IT IS SOUTH
KOREA THAT
DETERMINES
WHAT PEOPLE
CONSUME,
FROM POP
MUSIC TO
SMARTPHONES.**



Jebi Dabang Café, in the Hongdae district, transforms from daytime coffee shop to late-night live music venue. Left: The Cheonggyecheon stream refreshes downtown Seoul.



Fans show some love for Korean pop star Kim Junsu in a Gangnam district concert hall.

restaurants per capita in the world? The South Korean capital is full of such brain-melting factoids. Somehow, without anyone noticing—and by anyone, I mean me—Seoul has become one of the great cities of the world, a giant pulsating star, radiating its energy to the farthest corners, too busy with the here and now to worry about the apocalyptic shenanigans of its northern neighbor. Where, I wondered, does one even begin to explore a city like Seoul? “You should begin in the very center of Seoul,” my friend said.

AS IT TURNS OUT, the center is found on Mount Namsan, an idyllic 860-foot promontory capped by the N Seoul Tower, which looms over the city like a watchful sentry. I like to begin the day with a little serenity, and the undulating four-mile footpath that encircles the hill is about the only place you’ll find it in this dense urban wonderland. It was late winter when I strolled up its slopes—the streams that tumbled down the hillside remained frozen and the trees barren—but the ever present clamor of birdsong suggested that spring was imminent.

Here and there I came across remnants of the old city walls, constructed during the early Joseon dynasty, when Mount Namsan marked the southern border of Seoul. Interspersed

throughout were the exercise yards typical of East Asia, which seemed to be the exclusive domain of elderly gentlemen, each with an old-timey transistor radio emitting the warbling love songs of a bygone Korea. There is a cable car to the peak, but I chose to follow an enchanting stone stairway, and after 45 minutes of clambering I emerged at the top, where I was greeted by the sight of tens of thousands of “love locks” hung on fences, gates, railings, and even officially sanctioned, specially designed metal “trees of love” that line the paths like Christmas trees.

Love is a serious business in Seoul. One of the first things that come up in a budding relationship is determining whether or not a couple is blood compatible. Many Koreans believe that blood type determines personality. Type A’s, for instance, are understood to be kind though prone to being introverted and perfectionists. I, as a Type O, am apparently a confident, expressive, egotistical risktaker, which does not sound good but does help explain some questionable life decisions.

But I had not come here for romance. I bought a ticket to the observatory deck of N Seoul Tower and rocketed up in a swift elevator. At the top, the first thing one encounters is a Weeny Beeny candy shop, and while tempted, I had not come to the mountain for sugar either. No, I had come to behold Seoul.

Its immensity is staggering. Tower after tower stretching off as far as the eye can see, filling every nook and valley of the rugged landscape, from the Lotte World Tower, which ascends to 1,821 feet, to the hundreds of apartment blocks.

And for the visitor, there is everything here, as I would discover in the days ahead. Do you desire some old-school imperial Korea? Well then, head on down—via cable car, regally—to Changdeokgung, the Palace of Illustrious Virtue, the home of Korea's last emperor, and wander the grounds, making sure to visit the secret garden, and accept your insignificance.

Restore your humanity with a walk through the alleyways of Bukchon Hanok Village, where more than 900 traditional Korean homes and guesthouses have been carefully preserved. Absorb the tilting, angular roofs, the heavy wooden doors, and the decorative brick walls, and remember that once upon a time Seoul was but a small town. Then make your way to nearby Hyoja-dong, long a home for craftsmen but increasingly recognized for its avant-garde art galleries. Not as well known as Samcheong-dong, Seoul's venerable art mecca, Hyoja-dong is notable for its commitment to preserving the historic ambience of this district of *hanoks* and mazelike passageways while welcoming the hot glare of the contemporary art world.

And now you're hungry, of course. And because you're a first-time visitor to Seoul, you have no idea where to go. That's OK! Because what Seoul does really well is street food. There are dozens of markets spread throughout the city. Some, like Dongdaemun, are known for fashion. Others, like Namdaemun, are known for, well, everything. If you can't find what you're looking for in Namdaemun, it's probably not available anywhere on Earth. Spicy rice cakes and Korean fried chicken (so much tastier than its American version—sorry, Southerners) are ubiquitous, but keep your eyes open for silkworms (*beondegi*) and poo bread. Trust me.

Nearly every Korean, it seems, is passionate about food. And you soon understand why. Korean cuisine is not subtle. Every bite is a carnival of tastes, from the fiery chicken feet (*dakbal*) to the bitter dandelion salad (*mindeulle muchim*) and sweet Korean pancakes (*hotteok*). Me? I like the traditional *galbi* restaurants, where you grill marinated beef short ribs at your table while your dining companions get marinated on *soju*, the local firewater. And perhaps no place does it better than Mapo Sutbul Galbi in trendy Apgujeong-dong, where the stars of K-pop and film come to dine. People are beautiful here, but now so are you. You have arrived. You are in the center of the universe. You are in Seoul.

J. MAARTEN TROOST is the author of several travel memoirs. His latest, *I Was Told There'd Be Sexbots: Travels Through the Future*, will be out in summer 2017. This is photographer **ADAM DEAN's** first feature for Traveler. For more Best of the World facts, photos, and videos: natgeotravel.com/besttrips2017.



Seoul Stays

TRADITIONAL GUESTHOUSES

Hanok Homestays

Travel back in time at a traditional Korean house (*hanok*), with its upturned tile roof, paper-screened windows, and interior courtyard. Home-cooked meals are often included. The Hanok Homestay Information Center, in Bukchon Hanok Village, can book reservations.

BOUTIQUE BEDS

Imperial Palace Boutique Hotel

This playful, high-design spot (have a go on the cushioned swings in the lobby) is located in Itaewon district, with its trendy restaurant and bar scene. From \$100. imperialpalaceboutiquehotel.com

MOUNTAIN AERIE

Grand Hyatt Seoul

Perched on Mount Namsan, this luxe hotel offers grand views, indoor and outdoor pools, and possibly the best health club in the city. From \$200. seoul.grand.hyatt.com

CENTRAL CONVENIENCE

Lotte Hotel Seoul

Business travelers love this centrally located hotel, owned

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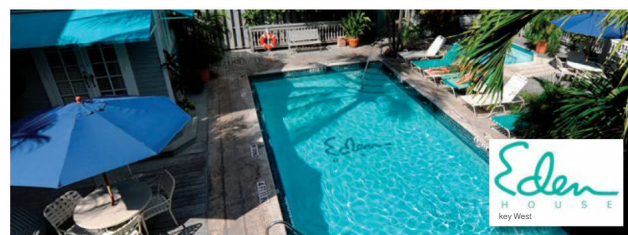
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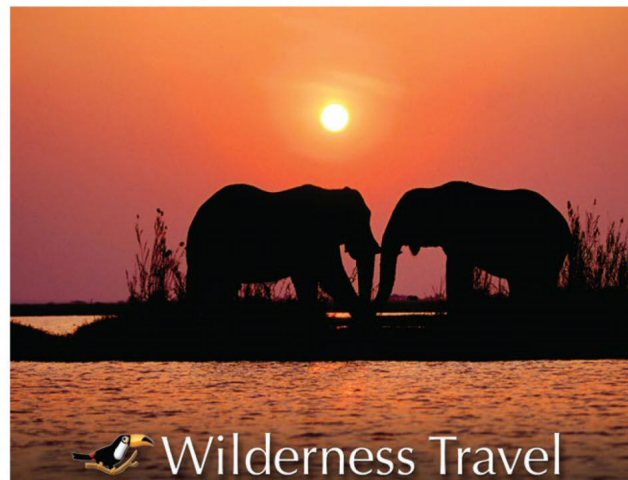


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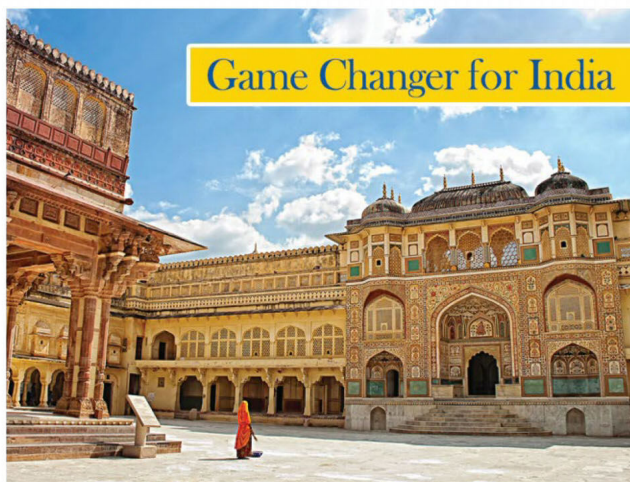
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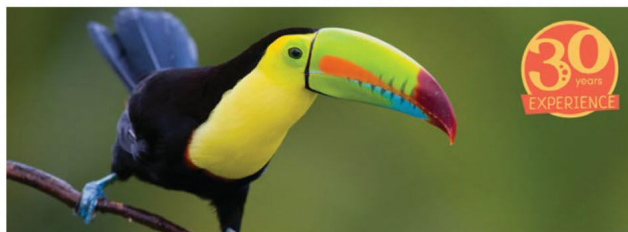
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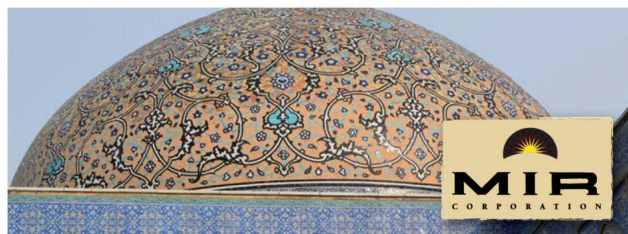
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On High With an Orangutan

National Geographic photographer Tim Laman planted a camera in the rain forest treetops

By Nina Storchlic

When photographer Tim Laman saw a young male Bornean orangutan begin to climb a fig tree, he readied himself to trigger the shutter of a remote-controlled camera. Earlier, Laman had hidden a GoPro camera a hundred feet above the rain forest in Borneo's Gunung Palung National Park, certain the primate would come back for the bounty of fruit. The resulting image, which won Laman the title of Wildlife Photographer of the Year for 2016, captures both the orangutan and its native habitat. "This is a totally wild orangutan who would never tolerate a photographer in the same tree or this close," Laman says.

The photographer, who has a Ph.D. in biology, has been studying ecology and wildlife in Borneo since 1987. Right now, only 45,000 endangered Bornean orangutans remain in the wild. Around 2,500 make their home in this 266,000-acre park, which hosts seven distinct ecosystems and plenty of climbable canopies.



PRO TIP

"Don't shoot only at eye level," says our photo director, Anne Farrar. "Try out different angles for another point of view."

■ See more of Laman's photography in *National Geographic's* Dec. issue.

TIM LAMAN

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